PAUL HERVIEU

THE FRAMEWORK

The Framework
by Paul Hervieu

Originally published as
L'Armature
(Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1895)

Translation 2026
by
Claude AI (Anthropic)
in collaboration with
Marko Prekić Kentera

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FIRST ENGLISH TRANSLATION

The Framework

PAUL HERVIEU

L'Armature

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Paul Hervieu

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In Lieu of a Foreword

The following essay on Paul Hervieu originally appeared in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* (Sixth Period, Vol. 30, No. 2, 15 November 1915, pp. 437-456), some months after the writer's death in that tragic year.

Its author, René Doumic, was himself a distinguished man of letters—critic, essayist, and literary editor of the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. He would later become Permanent Secretary of the Académie française in 1923.

Writing with the authority of one who had followed Hervieu's career from its beginnings, and with the particular insight of a fellow Academician, Doumic offers here both a critical appreciation of Hervieu's novels and plays and a meditation upon the writer's place within the French literary tradition.

In Lieu of a Foreword

The death of Paul Hervieu marks a grievous loss to French letters. He had carved out for himself an expansive place in the foremost rank. Novelist and dramatist by turns, he had abandoned the novel only after enriching it with some of his most original and powerful works, and had taken to the theatre only to furnish it with plays invariably interesting, curious, and bold—one of which, at the very least, has achieved the status of a classic. He was indisputably a master of his craft.

Did the emotions of these fifteen tragic months bear some share of responsibility for the sudden death that struck him down before old age had arrived? Who could deny it? He too had been touched by the war, which, striking close to home, had wounded him in his family affections: it had added to the common anguish the

intimate sorrow of private bereavement. And it had dealt a cruel blow to his dearest convictions, shattering his hopes or, if you will, his illusions. Attaching inestimable value to human life, impassioned in his devotion to individual liberty, consecrated to the worship of justice, he abhorred war. He had willed himself to believe that the age of great slaughters was ended, that nowhere in the world could there be found a creature capable of unleashing upon humanity the unheard-of cataclysm that a European conflict would represent, given the present state of modern armaments. The reply of facts was to be this war of massacre and destruction, surpassing in horror the darkest memories preserved by history! He had been humiliated by it in his conscience as a man, even as he was crucified by it in his heart as a Frenchman. In the presence of the terrible crisis through which his country was passing, he had borne with impatience that torture of powerlessness from which we all suffer—we who stand outside the sphere of action. Now, he belonged to that order of men in whom every wound assumes a peculiar sharpness. An excessive sensibility, a mind too penetrat-

ing by half, had fashioned within him a soul naturally given to suffering.

One had this impression merely from seeing and hearing him, without any need to have penetrated his intimacy—which, moreover, he protected with watchful discretion and jealous reserve. I do not propose to draw his portrait, which is too well known, but only to show how closely the man resembled his work. Everything about him spoke of elegance and distinction, and suggested the man of the world rather than the literary craftsman. His manners were of perfect correctness, his politeness studied and refined. His courtesy was proverbial: no one carried further the probity of dealings, the reliability of relations, the faithfulness of friendship. However slight the service he had received, he never forgot it, and made it his particular pride to repay it with interest. His apparent coldness served only to ward off importunate displays, which he detested, as he detested everything that exceeded measure and rang false. He pursued to the point of morbid anxiety this quest for truth beyond all false appearances. What struck one in his troubled countenance was, beneath the high arch of his

strongly marked brows, the clear, penetrating, insistent gaze of those pale blue eyes—eyes of steel-blue—which settled upon things and people with an air of wanting to wrest from them their secret. His conversation, of the most spirited turn and the most charming urbanity, was sharpened by a point of irony. He spoke little, in a slow and veiled voice, with evident care never to offend against propriety, and with a constant vigilance lest he wound or distress his interlocutor. Yet often an incisive word, a remark honed to an epigram, a sally fashioned in the manner of an aphorism, betrayed in him a fundamental disenchantment.

Not that he had any cause to complain of life, and indeed he did not complain. Born into a family of comfortable bourgeois circumstances, never having had to reckon with material necessities, he had been free to follow his inclinations in the choice of a career. He had tried his hand at diplomacy first. An appointment that sent him to South America completed his understanding of his true vocation. Thenceforth he belonged entirely to letters. Success came to him very rapidly—by which I mean, first of all, that complete artistic achievement which is the

supreme reward and joy of the writer who has succeeded in producing exactly the work he intended and was meant to produce. For five-and-twenty years he was among the authors most beloved by the public: nowhere is this better known than here, where he gave some of his finest books and where he counted fervent admirers, beginning with Ferdinand Brunetière, who never ceased to encourage and support him and who took up his pen more than once to bear public witness to the high esteem in which he held him. The theatre, where one may say he knew no failures, brought him triumphal evenings. Society fêted him. He enjoyed among his fellow writers an authority owed above all to the prestige of his talent, but also to his qualities of uprightness and scrupulous fairness. These had made him the arbiter to whom men turned in difficult cases. His reputation was great beyond France. In the year preceding the war, during a journey to Spain, he had been received almost as an official representative of French literature. The most coveted honours had fallen to him, yet never exceeded his deserts. Such was his constantly fortunate destiny.

But he belonged to a generation that carried within itself the seed of sadness. At the age when sensibility takes form, it had been subjected to the cruellest of trials, that whose imprint never fades. Witness to our disasters and to the horrors of the Commune, it was destined to remain bowed beneath that memory. Its impulse had been broken before the race began, its capacity for enthusiasm dried up at the very source. It forbade itself dreams, it mistrusted the ideal: confined within reality, it contemplated it only under its darkest aspects. Made fearful by precocious experience, rather than expand outward, it preferred to fold back upon itself. From a kind of modesty regarding the intimate wound that never ceased to bleed, it sheltered behind irony. Its entry into literature was marked by a resurgence of pessimism. This was not the declamatory, lyrical melancholy of 1830, but rather a hard realism, a dryness of disillusioned soul, which expressed itself in a refusal to be duped, in a determination to paint things black so as better to guard against disappointment by them. Paul Hervieu is eminently representative of that generation of 1880, upon

which weighed the oppression of what we for so long called “the war.”

Everything connects. At the Lycée Condorcet, where he had pursued his studies, Paul Hervieu had had as his teacher of rhetoric an excellent humanist, that same Maxime Gaucher who was, a few years later, to teach letters to Henri Lavedan. But the time of fervour for the seventeenth century had passed. Men repeated Michelet’s dictum: “The great century… I mean the eighteenth.” It was there that Paul Hervieu went to seek his philosophical creed and the homeland of his imagination. However severe his habits of impersonality, I have always believed that he put much of himself into a character from *L’Énigme*, the Marquis de Neste. He lends him his aversion to all violence, his horror of bloodshed; and he attributes to him an amiable grandmother who “frequented to excess Crébillon the younger and Rousseau, d’Alembert and the young Chevalier de Parny.” To another of his characters he gives these words: “I read you in the same fashion as those little intricate tales of the eighteenth century, where sensation was everything whilst sentiment was nothing.” He too had read extens-

ively those little intricate tales, the gallant ones and the others. And how many times, threading through the morose reflections inspired in him by the spectacle of worldly manoeuvring, have I not thought of a certain letter in which Madame du Deffand describes her weary solitude amidst the chatter of her salon? With the wit that he possessed—and he possessed it in abundance, of the most natural yet most refined sort—Paul Hervieu would have held his place in the brilliant companies of that other century, that other fin de siècle. He would have displayed there less the insouciance of a Rivarol than the acerbity of a Chamfort; and he would have breathed with delight that atmosphere of elegant living and mocking incredulity, of morality "without hypocrisy" and precious art.

At the period when he made his début as a writer, literature, sickened of naturalism, was disengaging itself from it yet continued to submit to its influence. Maupassant had just revealed himself; Anatole France was giving the world *Sylvestre Bonnard* and Loti *Le Mariage de Loti*; Henry Becque was passing for the head of a school; Jules Lemaître was making his tour of the *Contemporains*, and Paul Bourget in his *Essais de psy-*

chologie was analyzing in advance the "states of soul" of the new generation. In 1882, Paul Hervieu was five-and-twenty. That is no longer the age of ingenuous verses and morning poetry; perhaps it is not yet the age at which one is in a posture of having returned from everything. Among so many celebrated personages, the one whom the author of *Diogène le chien* chose as hero of his first book was that unpleasant jester who made it his profession to fling defiance at all customs, all beliefs, all proprieties. Diogenes had been wealthy, he had squandered his fortune, and, being ruined, had turned misanthrope after the fashion of Timon of Athens. Laboriously, he abandons himself to all manner of eccentricities, caring for morals and the letter of the law only in order to flout them. "This," remarks his biographer, "was not destined to lead him to any serious position." At Corinth he visits Laïs; we know that our modern Hellenists borrow more from the *Dialogue of the Courtesans* than from the *Symposium*: to a little Plato they add a great deal of Lucian. The episode of the encounter with Alexander is treated, as is fitting, to the honour of the Cynic and the shame of the monarch. At the philosopher's death, his disciples

quarrelled over his corpse: “they came to blows in order to reach agreement.” One knows this stylistic device that brings together in a single phrase two antinomical ideas. Does the author, moreover, impute to Diogenes merit or criminality for his cynicism, and does he find him more audacious or more foolish? One would be hard put to decide, for it is the very essence of irony that one cannot determine with exactness where it begins, where it ends.

It is the same cold mockery that the chronicler of *La Bêtise parisienne* trails through the formulas of political life, the rites of gaping idleness, and the singularity of curious—that is to say, baroque—customs. Since Montaigne, the philosophy that holds our reason in small esteem has delighted in drawing parallels between savages and the civilised, and in preferring the savages: the Eskimo recounts to us the lamentable odyssey of a wretch transported from the pole to the Jardin d’Acclimatation there to perish in agony. Another theme consists in studying the psychology of madmen, with a view to discovering in it the application of certain qualities of which sensible persons show themselves most proud. In *Les Yeux verts et les Yeux bleus*, the murderer is a devotee of

logic: he executes with rigorous consistency of thought the crime suggested to him by a practical joker, forgetful of that truth that one does not trifle with madness. In *L'Inconnu*, a case of lucid madness is complicated by a tale of unlawful confinement. You recognize this literature of fear in which English and American storytellers excel. Irony remains its mistress, but under that particular form we call humour.

I should not dwell upon these early works, in which nevertheless the portrait of the writer begins to take shape, were it not necessary to point out most particularly the *Nouvelles de l'Alpe homicide*. An idea runs through them: the malevolence of nature. The mountain, whose enormous and obsessive image one encounters at every turn of the horizon, seems some crouching monster, watching for the prey that will of its own accord offer itself to its voracity. So the people of the eighteenth century still regarded it. That frozen immensity, so disproportionate to the stature of the man it crushes, bristling with abrupt slopes, strewn with frightful chasms, shaken by storm and avalanche, inspired then nothing but terror: no one would have conceived that one might venture

there for pleasure. Such indeed is the impression given by the first of these tales, wherein the tender Annie Martindale glimpses for the last time, like an ant climbing along a colossus of snow, the dearly beloved husband whom a sudden tempest is about to make a corpse. And how can one forget that *Secret du glacier inférieur*—the glacier that marches and yields up its victim? The human drama is completed there by a sort of natural fantastical element. The malice of fate, the injustice of men, the impassivity of things—all is united in these pages, a masterpiece of concentrated art, of vigorous and sober narrative, which Mérimée might have signed.

It is now that Paul Hervieu will reveal his full originality and resolutely enter the domain where he will establish himself as master: the study of fashionable life. Until this point, he had developed borrowed themes and painted from imagination: now he will paint from the living model. What drew him towards this kind of study one might easily divine; but he has explained himself at length through the mouth of Guy Marfaux, the society painter of *Peints par eux-mêmes*. It is first of all that fashionable life, being exactly the contrary of life accord-

ing to nature, presents, at each epoch, the latest state to which humanity has arrived in that progressive march which ceaselessly distances it from its origins. It is a product of art, and for that reason it interests an artist. And all its art and all its artifices profit whom? Woman, of whom it creates an ever more complicated type, more seductive, more intoxicating, and consequently more feminine. As for those who think that fashionable literature must necessarily be insipid, conventional, and devoid of truth, they are ignorant of what constitutes its very object. In a drawing-room, everyone is on display; each plays a part: it is for this very reason that comedy flourishes there as upon chosen ground and constitutes the principal diversion for winter evenings or summer days. In *Flirt* there are tableaux vivants; in *Peints par eux-mêmes* an historical drama, for which the historic dwelling of Pontarmé serves as a setting to perfection; in *L'Armature* a pastoral finds its proper place at a financier's reception. But what are these mediocre comedies beside that which, in these same drawing-rooms, is played out in earnest and with superior art, and which is par excellence the comedy of society? A comedy some-

times merely comic, but which so often turns to drama! “The two actresses, faithful to their part of good breeding, had to preserve a gentle voice, say nothing of what they would have had to say to each other, and swallow with a smile all the venom with which their tongues were charged, ready to be naturally spat in the adversary’s face.” Now, what the novelist has for his task to make us perceive is that which hides beneath this varnish, beneath these studied expressions and prepared words. He unveils, beneath the life that appears, the life that conceals itself—forbidden loves, unavowable hatreds, stolen glances, furtive pressings of hands, compromising letters, encounters, assignations, liaisons, betrayals, and vengeances—“the other life, that which is invisible like thought and which is something more than merely being true, since it is in that quintessence of truth: the secret.” What quest more tantalising? What chase more thrilling? And it is this chase upon which the society novelist sets out each morning.

Here, for one who wishes to succeed, it is not enough to be either a faithful annalist or even a penetrating moralist and a subtle psychologist. Another condition is

essential. The failing of many people who speak of society is that they speak of it only by hearsay. The account they give is neither flattered nor uglified, nor even mendacious: it is beside the point, it does not apply. Let us leave aside the simple bohemians, like Cyprien Marfaud, who have seen people of fashion only from the lodge where the cord is pulled for them: they construct the society novel at the concierge's door. But very great writers have gone astray in describing this most particular life, through having observed it only from without. Society yields itself only to those who belong to society. Paul Hervieu belonged to it. He had gained, through assiduous attendance, its familiarity. He had assimilated its ways of being, its states of sensibility, its determining motives. He had acquired the subtle tact of these lacklustre souls. He found his way through the labyrinth of their complications. He possessed the cipher of their conventional language. He was a man to commit neither an error of interpretation nor a fault of taste.

What, moreover, was precisely this world that he knew so well? One says "society," but there are several sorts of society. That which Paul Hervieu describes is not

the aristocracy proud of its ancient names and old traditions, any more than it is the upper bourgeoisie, wealthy, prosperous, of solid fortunes and unblemished reputations, and it goes without saying that it is not the demimonde. To appreciate this variety precisely, let us consult a list of guests. It is for the tableaux vivants at the Balbenthal residence. “One was already certain of having the Eliasaphs, of Dammarie-les-Lys; the Saint-Thibaults; the Saint-Mesmes; the Weilchenfelds, of Chevry-en-Sereine; the Kerzenscheins, of La Chapelle-la-Reine; the Villévèques, the General and Madame de Montparnoy with all their children, daughters-in-law and sons-in-law; the Oberblasers, of Grande-Paroisse; many officers of the 32nd Chasseurs and of the Artillery School; the Marquise de Nauregard; the Count, the Viscount and the Baron Bourgeois; the Amramsohns of Croix-en-Brie, etcetera. Mrs. Hobbinson had promised to come with her daughter, from Paris.” This makes a society not exactly mixed, but nonetheless rather disparate. One gains admission through a fortunate turn on the Stock Exchange, one is excluded for a speculation that turns out badly or for some disagreeable affair. A world in perpetual motion,

ceaselessly in the process of making and unmaking itself, whose changing personnel, subject to sudden eclipses, elegant, brilliant, without hauteur and without prudery, is moreover more amusing than many more closed societies.

The law of this world, in the words of the most informed of witnesses, the sun around which it revolves, the star towards which it turns, the soul that moves it, the good, the unique good whose possession it pursues distractedly, is love. How could it be otherwise? Here are nothing but idle folk in quest of some distraction from their boredom. Between these men intent upon making themselves agreeable, and these women armed with everything that can make them desired, love springs forth like a natural electricity. “It is the sole subject of the words the former speak and the airs the latter assume. One talks of it, one talks it, and perhaps one does it even more than I could venture to affirm.” This term love designates, in common parlance, the most different of relations, and sometimes it is applied to a sentiment so complex that psychologists aided by physiologists exhaust in vain all their science in attempting to define it.

This is not the case here; to restore its true name to the love in question, and which alone is in question, one would have to call it: the taste for pleasure. We are in the kingdom of sensuality. No scruples of any kind. A religion wholly external and conventional, reduced to practices which themselves form part of fashionable life. Complete amorality. The tolerance of opinion, which recoils only before scandal. Social constraint has just precisely the effect of rendering the triumph of instinct more precious. Art is added to nature. And the vestiges of a long Christian atavism, accumulated in the depths of souls, serve only to quicken this pleasure of love, by making of it a sin.

Flirt, *Peints par eux-mêmes*, *L'Armature* form as it were a triptych of fashionable manners. The first of these novels leads us only to the threshold of the enchanted isle. It begins with the first encounters, almost innocent and scarcely tinged with coquetry, between the little Madame Mésigny and Monsieur des Frasses; it concludes with the imposing ceremony of a Christian marriage, from which the future lovers borrow a little of its mysticism to solemnise their illicit engagement. Around this

principal subject run secondary and ancillary intrigues. Couples crisscross as in the *Embarkation for Cythera*. They are distinguished only by the age of the participants, and the marvellous galley might bear upon its colours Voltaire's lines: "Whoever thou art, behold thy master. He is, he was, or must be so." If the idyll of Agnès and Roland is that of two youngsters, Admiral de Kerguel and Mrs. Hobbinson represent the side of parents and even grandparents. The most curious type is that of Madame de Prébois, that hostess who, having passed the age of amours, finds a nostalgic pleasure in making her house a meeting-place where, under pretext of providing conversation, she provides opportunity for loving. She always invites together those persons between whom she suspects or arranges a flirtation. "If she could have satisfied only her preferences, she would never have assembled any but young creatures, clandestinely enamoured with illegal sentiments for one another. Nothing titillated her so much as to suppose a gallant humour in the blood that circulated invisibly around her." She is the discreet go-between whose hospitality suits this accommodating society.

We have as yet seen only the décor, the attractive surface of fashionable life: we have been allowed scarcely a glimpse of its terrible underside. *Peints par eux-mêmes* places us face to face with the worst realities. This epistolary novel has been compared to *Les Liaisons dangereuses* and the observation made that it is inspired by it. That is not saying enough. Laclos's novel is one of those that ought to be remade every hundred years; Paul Hervieu wished to remake it: his merit is to have succeeded completely. For clearness of vision, depth of analysis, and the pitiless precision of execution, it equals its model. The characters much resemble those of *Flirt*, all the people of one world having amongst themselves a family air; but they are painted this time with an asperity that accentuates the features, with a boldness that casts aside all veils. The very type of Madame de Prébois reappears in that of the Dowager Marquise de Nécringel, the old zealot of love, who expounds its theory and deduces its principles. This former virtuous lady, become a learned matron, specifies three conditions that must be united in a perfectly ordered fall. "Furnished with these three reasons, amongst which an essence of expiation

mingles with the fault to purify it, a woman appears to me unable to do otherwise than give herself, nor even able to do anything better, more fine, more nobly humble, more modestly grand; I was about to add: nothing more Christian." These are the commandments of adultery. We know well enough that dogmas do not die: they transform themselves. A society without religion slides into the religion of love. The letters of this old Necringel contain its creed.

Confidences exchanged, consultations solicited and granted necessarily compose the substance of an epistolary novel, and I know not whether the naïve shamelessness of certain counsels does not inform us even better than actions about the vileness of those who give or receive them. The composition consists, once again, of juxtaposed intrigues. But whereas in *Flirt* the ages differed, here it is the temperaments. Françoise de Trémur is the fanatic of love; Anna de Courlandon is the curious one, in quest of the desired and ever-awaited revelation; Vanoche, Vanitoche is the scatterbrain, the featherhead, designated victim of the ignoble Munstein. Let us not forget the letters in which the Prince de Caréan and

his noble father debate the conditions of an opulent marriage: as matrimonial business letters, they achieve perfection of the genre. Those of Cyprien Marfaud are scarcely less instructive for the light they cast upon bad company: everything occurs there exactly as in the other, save for the difference in manners. The sole difference, indeed, by which one distinguishes the various classes of society, and such is the lesson of the book. A central scene summarises and condenses its tragic horror. It is one of the most audacious in modern literature, and treated with as much art as power. When Madame de Trémur, justly anxious about the consequences of her fault, finds herself in the presence of the accommodating old physician, our imagination conjures up those assize court dramas that respect for public morality surrounds with closed doors. The author intended it so. The blackness of his pessimism triumphs in showing us that at every floor of the social edifice the same practices are employed. The bite of his satire results from the contrast between the quality of the actors and that of their acts. It is only too evident that the happy, wealthy, adulated Françoise de Trémur, “the dear little flagrant offence,”

has none of the excuses that drive a daughter of the people to the most criminal aberrations.

The study would not be complete if it neglected a question of another order, of which, in truth, it is not admitted to speak amongst people of fashion. This question was not wholly absent from *Peints par eux-mêmes*, since Le Hinglé cheats at cards, a particularity which completes his portrait and perfects his resemblance to the profligates of olden times. It fills the whole of *L'Armature*. "The sole general basis of worldly relations," says someone, "the sole element that constitutes the family, society, the very law of the universe, is love." "No," objected Tarsul, "it is money." "How so, money?" "Do you know precisely what is defined by the word armature? One designates thus an assemblage of metal pieces, designed to support or contain the less solid or loose parts of a determinate object. Well! to support the family, to contain society, to furnish all this fine world with the rigorous bearing you see it possess, there is a metal armature which is made of its money." *L'Armature* appeared in these very pages and, although it is already twenty years since, it is impossible that any reader of this Review

should not have the memory of it present in mind. If the previous novel was in the sprightly manner of the eighteenth century, this one, nearer to Balzac, has his power with something of his heaviness. Money is its great mainspring: it is money that makes Baron Saffre one of the masters of the hour, money that holds in obedience the two sons-in-law of the business operator, and money that will reduce to submission the virtue of the touching Gisèle d'Exireuil, adulteress and martyr. Severe towards all the others, the novelist has pity only for this unfortunate Gisèle. He discovers for her treasures of indulgence. Is she truly worthy of them? To secure for her husband a sinecure, she has become the mistress of a wealthy protector. Many have done so, and others will do so again, but who compete for no Prix Montyon. The household lives upon the liberalities of the financier, and when the husband discovers the intrigue and flings at his wife the name of Saffre: "Kill him!" cries Gisèle. And she is the sole sympathetic character in the novel! By her we judge the others. Games of love and money, the latter leading to the former, and all ending in catastrophes—such is the

result of the inquiry: the author doubtless deemed it definitive, since he was not to return to it again.

One cannot fully characterise the originality of these novels without adding a few words on the style that Paul Hervieu had fashioned for himself in writing them. Criticism has often remarked upon the peculiarities of this style; it has not said clearly enough how deliberate they were. The reading of the writer's early books is from this point of view highly significant: the form is much more easy, clear, facile, and certainly not banal but without great relief. From the day he found his manner of observing and recounting, Paul Hervieu judged it well to adapt to it his manner of writing. Painter of a refined society, he made it a scruple of exactitude to equal its refinements by those of style. He believed it necessary to suggest by the complications of writing the complication of souls. Hence this laboured style, wherein one feels, at moments, that the author is applying himself not to be natural. Here again the eighteenth century furnished him with models, the foremost of which is Marivaux. His devices are those of *marivaudage* and those, moreover, to which preciosity has had recourse in all times. All the

figures that rhetoric catalogues are liberally drawn upon, and first the periphrasis, which is an art of defining things whilst avoiding naming them and of circling round rather than approaching them head-on. Example: “The afternoon frequently leads them to what the word rendez-vous, in a well-understood sense, can evoke of most transgressive of the ninth commandment and most frolic-some amongst the manifestations of nature.” The com-parison, sometimes drawn from afar and, for that very reason, pressed close: “The American then directed her pretty mouse-like muzzle towards the Admiral, whose gaze she encountered—a gaze that had been waiting and that departed immediately, like a courier enslaved to his service and never taking more than relay time.” The metaphor. This one, to designate someone distant, is altogether ingenious: “One would have said there were lackeys in the air, by whom he had the threshold of explanations shut in my face.” Hypotyposis, which is a mode of minute, animated, and mimed description: “Grommelain had that gesture of disdain which spreads the arms from the body and indifferently raises the shoulders, that movement which seems to discharge itself

of others and to make on either side of oneself an easy passage to let the fate of others go as it may, where it will." These pretty ways of writing, too pretty for the writer to have hit upon them without doing so expressly, are all the more noticeable as they break the texture of a style for the most part excellent and of rare precision. They must have been placed there purposely. They do indeed make themselves noticed, they force the reader's attention, they disquiet him, they irritate him, which is better than leaving him indifferent. It is Paul Hervieu who compares question marks to cramps of the soul. His style, which sometimes seems seized by sudden cramps, harmonises perfectly with this nervous art, of which one might say that it suffers from the nerves.

Now, at the very moment when these three fine novels have just secured him complete mastery of the genre, suddenly he turns away from it, never to return. The novelist becomes a dramatic author. He too yields to that attraction of the theatre which, about the same time, was drawing so many writers, to the point of absorbing almost all the sap of our literature. But the truth is that his entire past had been leading him towards it: the

moment had come for him to make his decision. That there were already dramatic elements in his tales and novels admits of no doubt. Recall the final episodes of *L'Inconnu*, the closing scene of *Peints par eux-mêmes*, and, in *L'Armature*, the abrupt reversal that takes place in the mind of Jacques d'Exireuil upon receipt of the anonymous letter: the sudden illumination that makes him discover the whole truth is an excellent theatrical effect. Better still. Because one has written moving pages does not suffice to mark one out for the theatre; but Paul Hervieu possessed naturally that cast of mind which causes one to perceive life in the manner of a tragedy; and, early on, he possessed that force, that vigour of hand, that energetic grasp, which seizes hold of the public and leads it breathless to the dénouement of an adventure. At the turning-point of his career where he had arrived, unable to remain eternally within a genre of portraiture in which he had said the essential and in a manner of writing where obscurity lay in wait for him, he felt the imperious need to renew himself: a secret and sure instinct warned him of the services the theatre would render his talent. It would first enlarge it by forcing it to

emerge from too specialised a world, to turn towards more general problems. Above all, it would vivify it, warm it, humanise it. In his novels, the author holds himself outside his characters; he does not make himself one with them; in presenting them to us, he judges them, he mocks them, he avoids being moved, irritated, indignant; he freezes himself in an attitude of cold irony. His ice must needs melt in the theatre, where one lives only by passion. He must needs put himself into the skin of his characters, and with them vibrate, palpitate, suffer, weep, and cry out. Thus he re-enters the broad current of life. Assuredly, before the considerable body of work of the dramatic author, all regret would be superfluous, and yet one has wondered why this abandonment of the novel without hope of return and why this severance so sharp. The reason is quite simple and resides entirely in an artist's scruple. The aesthetic of the theatre and that of the novel are not merely different, they are opposed; one must see things from a certain angle; it is a habit to acquire, a disposition of mind that must become second nature. Precisely because the two genres are neighbouring, one must avoid mingling the procedures of one with

those of the other. Paul Hervieu believed that one does not belong to the theatre by halves and that, in order to produce work there of worth and duration, it is not too much to consecrate to it all one's powers.

Point de lendemain, adapted from a tale by Vivant Denon, and even *Les Paroles restent*, had been merely trials. *Les Tenailles* is Paul Hervieu's true début in the theatre: it has remained one of his finest comedies. I have analysed almost all these plays as they were performed; I have indicated what appeared to me their strengths and weaknesses; I have often discussed their theories, I have always admired their fine literary bearing and their *vis tragica*. I shall therefore confine myself here to recalling the essential characteristics of this theatre, those which mark its evolution and its place in the body of modern production as a whole. Like many others at the same period, more than others, it is from Dumas *fils* that Paul Hervieu proceeds. The further we go, the more it appears that Dumas *fils* was the great force of the theatre in the second half of the nineteenth century, the initiator from whom derive even those who were to separate themselves from him or take decidedly the opposite path to his man-

ner. He had given of the thesis play a formula that had vividly impressed public and authors alike, and which was destined to remain viable for a long time. *Les Tenailles* and *La Loi de l'homme* issue directly from his plays on divorce and seem their prolongation. I hasten to say that they diverge from them by differences marked enough to constitute a new and highly personal art. Whereas Dumas put himself upon the stage, and, by turns Jalin, De Ryons, Thouvenin or Rémonin, was often in the whole play the liveliest character, drawing all eyes to himself, Paul Hervieu, faithful to his rule of high discretion, does not intervene in his plays; no raisonneur, mouthpiece of the author: the conclusion must spring from the facts as they are presented. A play by Dumas offers a swarming of characters and intrigues that diverts, but by dispersing attention: Paul Hervieu admits only a single action, in which take part solely those who are deeply engaged in it. And whilst upon the fabric of events Dumas casts the sparkling embroidery of his wit and the teeming abundance of his author's mots, often as useless as they are brilliant and gay, Paul Hervieu's dialogue, close-knit and pressing, admits not a word that does not

serve, not a stroke that is not an argument. Hence a particularly intense impression, a sort of Jansenist sadness, an austere nudity.

Let us go further. It is not only the construction of these plays that is original, it is equally their first conception and governing idea. Dumas *fils* believed, or feigned to believe, in the reform of society through that of legislation, both obtained by the influence of a useful theatre. Let divorce be re-established, and faults and crimes would be suppressed at a stroke. What, in his eyes, justified divorce was the unworthiness of wife or husband. From adultery, Claude's wife has fallen to infanticide; the Duc de Septmonts, like the Prince de Birac, deceives his wife and squanders her fortune. In *Les Tenailles*, on the contrary, Irène Fergan's husband is perfectly irreproachable. The sole reproach that his wife addresses to him is that she does not love him; but she maintains, and the author with her, that this reproach overrides all others and is indeed the only one that counts. "One is here below only to love and make one's happiness from the happiness one creates... I do not admit that the law should make of one being the property forever of another

being… Oh! that each should not be the first to possess the disposition of his soul and his body!" To the engagements that spouses contract and which the law mentions —aid and protection, fidelity and obedience—Paul Hervieu proposed to add: and love. After that, he knew well enough that love cannot be guaranteed by contract; he counted upon no legislative provision to ensure the happiness of future unions or disunions. It is by this above all that *Les Tenailles* is distinguished from plays whose object is the remaking of the Code. The reformers are optimists who expect the good of humanity tomorrow; Paul Hervieu does not share their illusions: he foresees too well what rebuttals reality will always inflict upon them. However supple or however slack the conjugal bond may become, it will never be able to accommodate itself to all the caprices and all the unforeseen movements of the heart. Our laws may be overturned, there will still be fine days ahead for conjugal drama and fine subjects for dramatists.

Let us note finally how much this theatre, in the best sense of the word, is "theatre." From the first exchanges, one breathes an atmosphere of conflict. Between the

authoritarian husband, positive, sure of himself, in possession of the horrible certainty—a character that Paul Hervieu abhors and whom he will not miss an opportunity to chastise or humiliate—and a woman who has need of tenderness, a terrible game is engaged. Since this tyrannical husband refuses her the divorce for which she has pleaded, Irène feigns submission. A child is born, grows up: the disputes recommence over his education. Fergan, still standing upon his rights, invokes his paternal authority, as formerly he had invoked his marital authority. He thus provokes the thunderbolt revelation: "You are not his father!" Henceforth, the situation is reversed. It is the woman's turn now to refuse the divorce, which would harm the interests of her son; the husband's turn to suffer. The parallelism is managed with minute exactitude and knowing cruelty. The torture of a man balances the torture of a woman. The pincers of marriage close again upon both spouses. It is the same at the dénouement of *La Loi de l'homme*. In Dumas's theatre, where vestiges of the romantic lingered, the dénouement untied the situation, were it by violence. Paul Hervieu leaves the guilty or the unfortunate more tightly riveted

to their chain. He relies upon time to execute the best vengeances because they are the slowest. Moreover, he does not admit those dénouements by iron and by fire, duels or assassinations, which formerly bloodied the stage to the greatest contentment of the peaceful spectator. It is against these that *L'Énigme* is clearly directed. Whilst the terrible gentlemen of Gourgiran profess the homicidal doctrine, the "Kill her!" of *L'Homme-femme*, the Marquis de Neste opposes to them his indulgent morality of an old humanitarian epicurean: "Well, no, no! it is not the murderous morality of these savages that must triumph. There must be justice here below and let no one pay more dearly than the fault is worth! Smiles, kisses, caresses cannot be expiated, like poisoning or parricide, in the blood of those who have done nothing but make love beneath the heavens." How is it then that there is a gunshot at the dénouement of *L'Énigme*? The play ends with a suicide, which is the type of assisted suicide, and which is equivalent to murder. It is that the theatre has its reasons, to which the reasons of philosophy can do nothing. This time, violence was in the logic of the situation. Besides, the public pays little attention to theories:

it asks above all that plays be well made. *L'Énigme* is a marvel of construction: Paul Hervieu has done nothing better as a craftsman of the theatre.

But his masterwork for the stage is that *Course du flambeau*, of incomparable grandeur and perfect beauty. I trust I may be forgiven for having somewhat disordered the dates in order to detach it from the whole, set it apart, and show in it a summit of dramatic art. How many times have we not deplored that mania of our theatrical writers who confine themselves to the study of a narrow and perverted society, and persist in placing upon the stage only exceptional types and questionable situations? Here is a play that opens for us a bourgeois interior where all love and esteem one another, resembling most French families. The question that troubles it is that question of money which, with greater or lesser acuteness, presents itself to so many households! The pitiless drama probes to the very depths of conscience; and there is not a word that the chastest ears cannot hear! This time it concerns neither the claims of the individual nor an article of the Code subject to revision; ah! it is something altogether different: a law of humanity sure as instinct, sovereign as

nature, and, like her, implacable. The ancient runner lit at the altar a torch that went forth to pass from hand to hand. “Each competitor ran, without a backward glance, having for sole aim to preserve the flame which he was nevertheless about to hand on immediately to another. And then, dispossessed, halted, seeing now only from afar the flight of the sacred radiance, he escorted it, at least, with his eyes, with all his powerless anxiety, with all his superfluous prayers. One has recognised in this *Course du flambeau* the very image of the generations of life.” It is this law which, unknown to them, operates at the heart of each of the characters and dictates their conduct. It explains the egotism of the two young people, persuaded that everything is owed them and unconscious tormentors of their parents; it constrains the unhappy mother to every sacrifice and to the final immolation of self: it expires—a subtle and strangely penetrating observation—before the old age of the grandmother, because she is in some sort “dehumanised” and placed by her age outside the Race. Terrible law that makes of this noble, good, and devoted Sabine Revel a thief, a forger, and finally a murderer! I know nothing that surpasses, for

invention in the horrible, the confession of this honest woman surprised by the stockbroker in a flagrant offence of another kind. It is Shakespearean horror transported into the prose of bourgeois drama. Neither declamation nor sentimentality nor theatrical strokes, nothing for effect, nothing but life, bleak and indifferent, full of stifled sobs, heavy with unrecognised dramas, like a great river whose waves could tell so many dark stories! This time, Paul Hervieu proceeds from no one, he answers to himself alone. All the enlarged resources, all the purified forces of his talent have gathered to produce the masterpiece. Let us not fear to say that in it he is the equal of the greatest.

The last plays of Paul Hervieu indicated a softening of his manner, an effort to draw closer to traditional morality. In *Le Dédale*, the divorced spouses are reconciled at the bedside of their child. They reconcile themselves too late, and it is unfortunate that before falling back into her husband's arms, the wife should have had the time and imprudence to remarry: this creates an inextricable situation, a "labyrinth" from which the author could only emerge by hurling both husbands into the depths of an

abyss that does not yield up its victims. But the observation remains, addressed to households too hasty to separate. In *Le Réveil*, a concurrence of circumstances, moreover rather extraordinary, permits Prince Jean to observe that she whom he had pursued with such ardent love wears her mourning very décolleté. Such are the mornings after these mad intoxications. The prince will return to his subjects, the married woman will return to her household: it will be better for everyone. In *Connais-toi*, the adulterous wife suggests to her accomplice this dénouement: reconciliation with her husband. The accomplice accepts with enthusiasm. It is at least proof that one must look twice before breaking a hearth that may become a refuge. Then the author takes up again some of his old themes. In *Peints par eux-mêmes*, he had spoken of "that primordial question which one calls the trifle, and upon which nevertheless all humanity pivots;" *Bagatelle* is a theatrical transposition of the novel of former days, attenuated according to the exigencies of the stage. *Le Destin est maître* is a play of construction that recalls the construction of *L'Énigme*.

One might still have expected much from a writer who remained so completely in possession of all the resources of his art. At the least, let us observe that this unfinished work presents, in its finest parts, a handsome character of solidity. It has already triumphantly withstood the test of time. One can reread *Peints par eux-mêmes* and *L'Armature*; neither of these novels, that of love and that of money, has aged a day. *La Course du flambeau* belongs by right to the repertory of the Comédie-Française, as the finished type of a genre that Diderot had only foreseen. The writer is one of those whom, after comparing them to their contemporaries, one detaches without difficulty from their milieu to situate them in the history of our literature. By the exactitude of his observation, by his fineness of moral penetration, as by the vigorous sobriety of his art, he stands in the great tradition. He has not confined himself to present reality: beyond the manners of his time, he has perceived those general laws that govern men of all times. Without departing from his reserve, with supreme elegance, he has thrown into powerful relief the irreducible opposition that exists between our nature and the disciplines to which we vainly strive to

constrain it. He has touched the very roots of the eternal conflict. Skilled in noting foibles and vices, he has scarcely hoped to correct men of them; but he has put his whole soul, enamoured of truth, into pitying them for these failings; and it is his honour to have bent so obstinately over human distress his meditative countenance and his grief-stricken smile.

René Doumic

The Framework

To
Monsieur Ferdinand Brunetière
of the
Académie Française

A good many years have passed since the day when, unknown to you and never yet having set eyes upon you, I came to bring you at the *Revue des Deux Mondes*—of which you were then Secretary to the Editor—my first attempt at a novel.

By way of introduction and recommendation, I had nothing at my disposal save the sincerity with which I felt bound to warn you that this work had already been refused elsewhere. I risked nothing by the admission: a character tempered like yours has every scruple and not a single prejudice.

The cause of the fledgling novelist having seemed to you defensible, you straightaway made it your own affair; and though you knew it not, I know how much I owe to you that it succeeded.

Since then, my admiration for your person and my affection for you have met, on your side, with a friendship constant, sure, and delightful—yet you have never allowed me to thank you for that now distant memory. For it is no easy matter to make you hear a little of the good one thinks of you, so long as you have any possibility of defending yourself against it.

Forgive me, then, my dear friend, if it is something of a stratagem to beg you, through the dedication of this new book, to accept the public expression of my enduring gratitude.

PAUL HERVIEU.

I

The Baron Saffre

That bright and bitter April evening, streams of carriages marshalled themselves in successive rows, hemming in Baron Saffre's grand house. The steady influx of vehicles flowed in by way of the Avenue du Corrège, only to emerge onto the Rue du Tintoret beneath a blossoming archway awash in honeyed light, with two lofty marble griffins standing sentinel at either side.

On this particular evening, the eminent banker was giving, as was his yearly custom, the magnificent reception, an occasion when he received en masse a selection of society's finest from the two Faubourgs. To his way of thinking, it was a sort of yearly assembly—one more to add to the list—over which he held court for the members

of that considerable concern christened the smart set. By these means, he sought to have his credentials as a gentleman and social arbiter reconfirmed—someone whom "the right people" could acknowledge and whose residence "the right people" were expected to visit—despite his detractors, the newspaper onslaughts, and the defamatory gossip bandied about in clubrooms. And truly, the scandals that had besmirched Baron Saffre's standing in the months before, casting shadows on his actions or morals, were cleansed away, obliterated, following a night when le Tout-Paris had observed him jovial, self-assured, flush with wealth, and thronged with guests. Using this short spell of splendid hosting, he urged everyone to take their cue from how the assembled company comported themselves towards him, and hence how suitable it was, for a period anyway, to begin afresh to regard and discuss him charitably.

"Surely not! The Baroness is ill?… We're not to see her?" each incoming guest pronounced in turn, in nearly identical tones of absent concern… "How disappointing!" they lamented, already moving on without pausing for

comforting updates, wholly absorbed in threading their way towards companionable faces summoning them.

“Oh! nothing to worry about! A bit under the weather… just awfully bad timing,” the Baron remarked again and again, flashing warm thankful smiles that, pulling double shifts in the brisk stream of invitees, landed softly in the spaces between, after those who had offered condolences had turned away, yet before those just arriving could voice their concern… “Such a fragile constitution!” he murmured now and then, hoisting his shoulders up in supplication.

The mighty baron of banking himself, however, stood ever hearty and positively glowing with vitality. And for the crowds around him who made it their business to snatch up any reason to show deference, disbelieving his actual age of fifty-nine offered a handy and justified form of flattery.

Barely would anyone have credited him with forty-five as, displaying his handsome presence, his powerful physique devoid of flab, his perfectly erect carriage supporting a lion-like head, he strode lightly forth, with Mme d’Exireuil on his arm, upon the white footbridge span-

ning above the conservatory to unite the showcase gallery with the art gallery.

The young lady felt compelled to stop midway across this bridge, which commanded the green expanse below as grandly as any ship's deck, with palm tops stretching upward until their leaves brushed against its sculptured railings. From this vantage point, she waved cordially at the clusters of people dotted beneath her, who mingled around planted borders within a wealth of exotic blossoms.

"Hello there, hello!" came the response from the Countess de Grommelain, daughter of Baron Saffre, who held court amongst a handful of male admirers with boisterous informality, her forefinger sunk into her bodice where she seemed to be stirring some hidden philtre beneath the guipure trim of her low-cut gown… "I'd say Papa's rather enjoying himself right now!" she added half under her breath, gesturing to those around her—and favouring Roger d'Iancey with a decidedly conspiratorial wink—towards the handsome companion the Baron Saffre was now accompanying on their flirtatious progress through this dreamlike panorama of magnificence, to

other stations of the stylish gathering convened in this temple of affluence.

Giselle d'Exireuil's exposed arm quivered with contained resistance against the weight of Saffre's arm upon it, a touch she could no longer delude herself into thinking innocent. With a slight but resolute movement, she regained a bit of play in her elbow; and, eager to prove agreeable enough through flattery to dispense with agreeableness through compliance:

"Where do you discover the time," she enquired, "to cultivate such remarkable taste?... such an aesthetically pleasing interior, such elegant flights of fancy!..."

"A tribute to my taste," Saffre retorted, "moves me deeply when it comes from your lips, for I venture to hope it is rooted foremost in the admiration you kindle within me."

Giselle's eyebrows drew together as she twisted her head aside. He let her turn away the rose-tinted, fresh oval of her fair face, which only left him more at liberty to disrobe with stolen glances those shapely hips, that arching back, and that divine décolletage whose fragrance had been enveloping him for several moments past.

"My goodness!" he went on, "I can't recall ever seeing you in a more delightful ensemble than tonight…"

This compliment discomposed Giselle, yet it was pique that caused it. It occurred to her fleetingly that the baron might be having a jest at her expense. This iridescent gown of peacock velvet—an entire season had gone by with her perpetually showing it off, hauling it to every occasion!… When she had broached the subject at home two weeks prior of having a new gown made expressly for the Saffres' party, she had been startled by the air of alarm with which her husband questioned whether it was really indispensable, admitting that just now it might not be altogether prudent. Thus she had attempted to repair as best she could the wear on a dress that, in the glorious evenings of a still-fresh and then-perfect happiness, had effectively been one of her most dazzling presentation dresses. Efforts had been made to mask its recognition as far as feasible, to transmute, to reinvent this regalia which the accomplishments of she who wore it had too profusely draped in renown, and under which, on countless occasions, young Giselle's form had throbbed with

social delight and beaded with perspiration in the glowing heat of drawing rooms.

Yet Saffre was not the sort to harbour such unseemly mockery in his thoughts. In fact, this marked the first instance where his predatory eye, habitually devoted to pursuing other visions of conquest, had dwelt upon Giselle long enough to absorb her manner of dress. Hitherto he had deemed her lovely, consistently displaying towards her a genial and uncommitted gallantry. Presently, having terminated an old attachment elsewhere, as with so many before, he found himself at liberty and ripe for new escapades. A longing was taking definite shape in him to secure his portion of the delectable and splendid being currently strolling at his side.

Her instincts informed her well that she had become the target of manoeuvres to be evaded from the host who was giving her the tour of his mansion with an already remarked-upon preference. She wished she could summon only loathing, yet discovered that what she actually felt was fear.

Alas! even as she shuddered, attempting yet again to fend off the audacious touch her escort pressed upon her

far too insistently as he steered her along, was not she constrained to manage tactfully the fragility of her predicament? Might not just a kindly nod from this prince of fortune, who proclaimed so emphatically his dedication to her, be sufficient to clear the financial straits she suspected her husband was likely wrestling with, though he would not entirely own up to them? It was none other than Jacques—through explanations she had understood precious little of, and which anyway she had barely heeded—who had lodged in her thoughts the indistinct idea of a scheme of his own devising, which Baron Saffre's endorsement would at once render a magnificent undertaking. Admittedly, Giselle could not conceive that she might prove useful in bringing off any business combination; still, she loved Jacques d'Exireuil, her mate, her Jacques, with a fierce, carnal and gentle passion. And having witnessed him of late preoccupied, oft-times dejected, she timidly avoided causing him any trouble. She dreaded giving way at an ill-chosen moment to some impetuosity of her haughty maiden's blood, which could threaten the benefits of their pleasant rapport with the baron, affront him and turn him unapproachable. Hence

it was herself she faulted for Saffre's recently forward behaviour. Out of innocent longing to become a bit of a helpmate to Jacques, had not she answered, initially, with too warm a willingness to courtesies whose improper meaning she had not at once detected in the other party? Had not she laced her gracious affability with a little measure of guile? And was not it incumbent upon her to muster some tolerance to withstand, up to a point, the immediate outcomes of her misstep, from so forward a man whom she might have rashly emboldened?

The pair, conversing in line with the emotions agitating them, were now concluding their walk along the renowned gallery, where spotlights turned towards the grand masters' works cast only their leftover solemn glow beneath the tread of crowds who had climbed there pilgrim-like and were instinctively chosen from the gravest attendees. Mostly gentlemen circulated there, among whom were silhouetted several powdered or tinted heads of dowagers, ennobled experts, elderly aficionados, whom Saffre acknowledged en route with appellations befitting their station: "my General," or "dear Marquis," or "Monsieur of the Academy." Now and then, a more spirited

and modish pair would pause at some Flemish domestic tableau or Italian celestial council, remarking upon it with movements of painterly passion, rhapsodic exclamations as though engaged in a love affair with painting itself. So it was, further along, with a young gentleman who was beginning to be frowned upon in the Faubourg for his presumed obsession, in spite of his illustrious name, with meddling in artistic pursuits. Whatever the case, it was just with such movements that he was at this moment applying himself to a canvas, eager to make its beauty shine for a lovely viscountess whom he had vowed to win solely through intellectual means.

At the gallery's furthest point, Saffre and Giselle came upon Count de Grommelain, one of the baron's two sons-in-law, who was squiring Princess Nagear.

The princess smiled at her host; yet she wrapped only Madame d'Exireuil in her scrutiny, with that detective quickness whereby women appear to wish to discover, in a single glimpse, the credentials of beauty and privileges of sin, obvious inducements and secret rationales, that another female's looks might present in a minute, for

having enchanted or being bound to enchant the man upon whose arm she is seen going by.

"Be sure to go in that way," said the princess as she walked on, "the view is divine!..."

From that point, then, Saffre escorted his companion into a gallery of sorts, from where they could overlook and appreciate in its entirety the splendid earthly show of the whole ballroom, flooded as it was with electric illumination.

The platform for theatrical entertainment rose at the far end, screened by a heavy drape formed by the convergence of two ancient hangings, bearing magnificently embroidered scenes of royal life. Only the arrival of the heir presumptive to the Esclavonian crown stood between them and the three knocks that would raise the curtain. The prince of the blood's tardiness caused Saffre no concern: experience had taught him the man was dependable and would settle his accounts on time—by showing up.

Across the ranks of golden seats blazed a brilliant display of naked shoulders. Women's hair, arranged in manifold crests and shot through with twinkling brilliance,

moved in gentle waves beneath an all but imperceptible breath of ease, in the soft stirring of vainglorious airs. A heady bouquet, laced with an exhausting buzz of conversation and the glimmer of satin, jewels, silk, flesh, velvet and gold, wafted up from these forty lengthy rows where, arranged with remarkable precision, so many different varieties of the female beast sat motionless, adorned in their gala finery.

The throng of men in evening wear, corralled at the back, included only those noble by birth or genteel in manner, practically all sporting names derived from bygone courtiers or contemporary battles, from holy figures or grand domains, just a select few having only their own fame to claim—some spangled with ribbons and orders, others preserving aristocratic inflections in their talk, perpetually sealing it with heraldic insignia.

And transcending all else, the assembly gave off that singular ambience which marks gatherings of ultimate worldliness: the misty sensation of being amongst equals, people tightly linked by nothing at all, and the insubstantial powder of what must crumble through mannerly

interactions where innumerable glances knock their ritual curiosity against their patrician unconcern.

From the elevated perch to which Saffre had led Mme d'Exireuil, she could reasonably assume he intended to exhibit the breadth of his worldly sway; and by his manner of speaking, she grasped perfectly that he was laying before her feet—in hopes she would consent to his staying there—all this sumptuous society, this glittering harvest of Parisian vanities that the baron was able to gather up in his powerful grasp. Yet since the pair of them were quite conspicuous to anyone who might, at any instant, think to look up, Saffre made a show of casting vague illustrative movements over the assembly, all the while endeavouring to speak in low tones with utmost clarity.

To begin with, he assumed a remarkably self-effacing air, as was his custom when managing certain affairs, affecting to be concerned only inasmuch as he could render himself helpful, obliging and charitable.

He proceeded to beset Giselle with words more coaxing than pressing, which she could not quite work out how to repel.

“Oh!” he breathed, “I should never have the audacity to achieve what is known as making a woman happy. And whoever would deign to admit me unreservedly to her friendship, who would let me feel the utmost gratitude towards her, such a one would not, alas! be exposed on my account to those passionate upheavals, those spells of jealousy, those raging fires which young men render—it must be granted—their overly singular claim to worth. I’m aware that substantial claims are no longer mine to assert, and I should allow myself merely the most unobtrusive”, he concluded in a manner more cryptic than comforting.

Giselle put on the look of courteous indulgence with which one attends to accounts that are entirely the business of the one who tells them.

“But then,” he carried on, “if my self-regard isn’t so bold as to promise happiness, I can at least ensure my dear friend is spared all sorrow, and see her most tyrannical flights of fancy fulfilled. My allegiance also vows to clear away those unforeseen complications, those impediments that crop up without warning to vex our days. Parisian living is such a harsh affair! Such ruin frequently

lies beneath this wild pursuit of enjoyment! You're quite unaware of all that, aren't you?… "

This time, he fixed her with an unintentionally severe look, by which Giselle felt examined down to the roots of her preoccupation with her husband's evident concerns.

"But how many there are," Saffre pressed on, "of the loveliest and most worthy souls, who knock themselves against predicaments as troublesome as they are absurd every single day… And however well-equipped with essentials one might be, aren't there myriad wild fancies that a pretty young thing must always be plotting to fulfil?… You know, any wish of a woman's, no matter what, has always appeared to me as the most consecrated thing in all creation… And those of my kind, he concluded, were devised for no other purpose than to make these beloved whims not simply attainable or effortless, but to fulfil them before they've even been fully formed into words."

While Saffre held forth comfortably, Giselle experienced a mounting instinctual anxiety for which she could find no explanation. It seemed a curious failing to hear herself all but explicitly pursued by a man famed for his

unconquerable determination in all matters. She felt a hazy alarm at being open to this prodigy of will possibly deciding to claim her without respite. She recognised absolutely that, against her inclination, Baron Saffre could effect nothing substantial upon her. Yet surely it is a primary tool of their might, amongst those fashioned to rule, this fascination whereby they inspire thoughts of unfathomable resources in themselves, within the souls on whom they have imposed their weighty speech and significant looks?

Luckily, breaking into this embarrassing scene came Arthur Saffre, who had been looking for his father. The Grand Duke of Esclavonia had been reported as arriving. The Baron excused himself to Giselle for being forced to go, charging his son with seeing her home.

Arthur Saffre was a good-natured lad, obliging to all and absolutely refusing to favour anybody in particular. Averse to sporting pursuits and inactivity alike, he had made no effort to gain entry to the prestigious clubs. His leanings drove him to apply the riches already his, and those yet to come, towards alternative sources of self-satisfaction. “Aim straight for the Institute,” the sardonic

Tarsul had counselled him… “You’ve got enough to buy your way into a lesser section when the moment comes. But before anything, fashion yourself an area of expertise, and particularly make certain it doesn’t upset other experts! Hence you could commit yourself to snuffboxes or waist-belt buckles. Keep clear of walking-stick heads or heel spurs: someone’s got those. Something might be done with topics of embossing, decorative tile-work or armour, who can say! in a century still up for grabs: the thirteenth century, let’s say, which appears presently ownerless… Root around in it, report whatever suits you to have found, no one’s going to check up on you. The sole requirement will be that you pour forth much enlightenment, heaps of light: clarify, clarify! And as you await your merit’s inevitable triumph, let me recommend the artists it would be pleasing to hire for bronze sculptures in your father’s parklands, or fresh architectural wonders, painted ceilings at the Saffre residence. Here’s an idea: commission your wife’s portrait right now from a painter, then a sculptor likely for the Academy, and why not an engraver. This will initially bring you favourable notice in artistic circles; and you could potentially reap

three votes in time, in recognition of the lucrative commission, the perfect advertisement you'll have secured for their shows…" In truth, one could not conceive of a more remarkable exemplar of beauty than this Catherine, whom they had succeeded in securing for Arthur Saffre from the supremely arrogant but thoroughly ruined house of Valdrenne de Ruys. And fashionable circles readily sneered at this coupling, with no justification save its patently ill-suited appearance on the surface.

Once the Grand Duke of Esclavonia, paunchy, smooth-faced, puffy, half-asleep, and shepherded by Baron Saffre, was seated in the place of honour prepared for him, the spectacle got underway.

The piece was a pastoral in verse with the novel feature of an all-female cast, six or so actresses costumed as rustic shepherds and shepherdesses, drawn from the most cherished darlings of the theatre-going public. A further novelty of the play lay in the sheer impossibility of understanding what its action consisted of, or what these charming little figures, so smartly turned out on stage, were proclaiming they desired of one another, amid the cerulean and heavenly-pink transports of the décor.

The dramatist was a worldly gentleman who, out of supreme discretion, preferred to remain unnamed, happy enough to know that all had guessed who he was. And in any case, people forgave his toilsome attempts at verse, since everyone felt certain that neither his rhymed bon mots nor his impeccably tasteful playlets would ever stray beyond the top-tier drawing-rooms, chosen embassies, or the most select clubs.

The spectators therefore found it impossible to catch the drift of the intrigue whose twists and turns played out before them. Yet this obscurity itself, by holding back the successful aspects, only rendered more dazzling the outbreak of cheers when, from the jumble of thoughts and images, there flashed an unmistakable idea accessible to all, one of those lines that never strike the ear as unfamiliar, and which each listener was primed to love at once.

Accordingly, a first wave of approving whispers rose from every side when Colin, occasioned by who knows what Colette had alleged, declaimed while brandishing his beribboned crook with a look of rapturous inspiration:

The age of youth is love's own age!...

Another enchanted tremor ran through the audience when white turtle-doves (drinking from a rivulet wholly lined with periwinkles) were evoked by the pretty mouth of another diminutive actress whom the Marquis de Renève believed he saw the Grand Duke was observing with amiable fascination. The observation passed from person to person, though with the affectionate mischief befitting, in this polished company, a foible that a Royal Highness had graciously allowed to be glimpsed. This secured for the thus-honoured actress an especially robust burst of applause—of which the author could partake—when she ended with this comparison so neat and agreeable:

Woman is the turtle-dove, and love the blossom!

Otherwise, there reigned throughout that sense of thoughtful attention and dutiful patience that a worldly assembly can, at a pinch, muster for salon theatricals wanting, to entrance them, the preferred quality of pure farce or ribaldry. A number of male viewers, a larger number of female ones, perceived themselves to be taking a course of poetry, refined wit, and culture. All embraced

the ordeal nearly merrily, as beneficial for their spiritual upkeep, just as each understood how to subject themselves also, should the need arise, to labours they judged crucial for their physical well-being. And when the curtain came down, the majority hazily summarised their cerebral experience as something that, every so often, one is happy to engage in—and above all to have finished. But those who assumed the play ended were alerted it consisted of two parts, and this was just an entr'acte.

In the most courteous manner, the Grand Duke of Esclavonia got to his feet, requesting leave to pay his respects to the artists. Offering Catherine Saffre his arm (she had been strategically positioned near him by the baron), he entreated her to show him the way behind the scenes. The whole party came alive at the same moment, relieved to move about freely, either calling to friends from afar or making their way to the refreshments.

The baron Saffre's second daughter, Julienne Bréhand, was engaged in quiet conversation with her husband in one corner of the performance hall where she had planted her thick-set figure, that dark-haired, highly-coloured mass of hers, that remarkable rotundity for a

woman of six-and-twenty who looked perpetually in the family way and had, to be sure, often found herself thus.

"Right then," she murmured, plying her fan, "pray make my apologies to Mama—I simply haven't the energy to climb up there and greet her properly. Let her know I'm quite done in by the heat…"

Olivier Bréhand cut rather a fine figure, distinguished by his flowing golden beard worthy of Ahasuerus. What a sensation it had caused when he had accomplished that masterstroke, vaulting from his humble administrative attachment to become, in one bound, Saffre's son-in-law. Yet by this time, people no longer thought it remarkable at all, the way we do with all things that simply are and persist. People readily understood Julienne's infatuation with this young man who was said, moreover, to have grown up alongside his future bride, his father having been an old college friend of the baron's. Concerning Saffre's blessing of this match with a man devoid of fortune, gracious ancestry or noteworthy kinship, he most definitely had his concealed motivations. For one thing, the mighty financier held a simmering antipathy towards the well-born, dating from when a naive streak in him—long

since corrected—had been painfully pricked by overly familiar contact with his first son-in-law's temperament. Instead of dealing again with someone of Count de Grommelain's ilk, whom he spotted lurking near his second daughter's marriage portion, he had already resolved to accept whoever else might come. Furthermore, establishing Julienne in marriage, on account of her unprepossessing looks, had invariably seemed to him a lesser concern, holding no promise of ever serving his ambitions or profits, and which he had been keen to settle for quite some time. Indeed, the girl had virtually always lived in isolation, in the care of a governess who would convey her every summer, solitarily and to no avail, to weight-loss resorts. All in all, the baron had made up his mind one day to clear his daughter off the books, per her request, acting as a breeder who ordinarily maintained only impeccable stock in his racing stables and hunting packs.

Those hard-scrabble early days had instilled in Olivier Bréhand a way of going about his current duties that mirrored his former approach to his old desk job. Whatever conscientiousness and obligingness had char-

acterised him as a clerk, he displayed equally as spouse, as progenitor of a rather large clan, as brother by marriage, and above all as son-in-law. Which was why, in all the to-do of this gathering where nobody spared a thought for the absent Baroness Saffre, he took it upon himself the task of going to the sufferer's quarters, to show her all the great solicitude that a small hepatic episode commands from one's relations.

Olivier forged ahead through the eminent mob. At one point, he believed himself trapped in the glass-panelled drawing room, where Saffre, closely besieged, flattered and lionised, looked with his formidable frame as though raised up on a regal step. To respond to all comers, the Baron adopted that gracious manner peculiar to the elect of supreme riches, which someone has cleverly christened 'famillionarity'. This enormous chapel-like hall, further glorified by a thousand mirrored candle flames, its radiant ceiling fashioning a heaven of polar lights, served as a temple where money was adored like a god too holy for mortal lips to name. To all assembled, any effort to examine this mystery constituted—if not outright sin—then surely a lapse in polite society's code. One and all fol-

lowed the established rites of veneration. The more self-reliant souls—those who in monetary terms enjoyed what is called independence—were able nonetheless to fathom why their less fortunate fellows, more athirst for expectations, made genuflections as overwrought as those performed on grounds of divine visitations or at wonder-working caves.

Finally reaching the vestibule, Olivier had the formation of breeched lackeys keeping guard make way, and mounted the onyx stairway with its plush woollen runner, from which the colossal full-figure portrait of Baron Saffre was visible at the first floor. The turn of the steps thereafter guided Bréhand into a string of outer rooms, where the gloom stood in melancholic opposition to the blazing radiance of the reception rooms below. He came upon the waiting woman, who went off to advise her mistress of Olivier's approach and reappeared with an invitation to usher him through.

Baroness Saffre reclined listlessly on an ottoman, reading by the delicate light of a lamp.

“Good evening!” she murmured faintly. “What a dear you are to come up!… No, I’m not doing too badly. Merely a shade worse than my ordinary condition.

And as Olivier was voicing his caring thoughts… and all his regret about…

“Thank you, my dear!” continued the baroness… “Do be sure to warn everyone when you go down, my daughters above all, against coming to see me. I won’t have people making a fuss. I’ll take myself to bed once I’ve had this potion that’s supposed to help one sleep… But do say?… in a word… what’s the atmosphere like below?”

“Most dazzling!… Though surely, in your heart of hearts, you’re secretly relieved your condition has sequestered you by your fire, well away from the burden of playing hostess and this mad commotion?”

A shake of her delicate head conveyed the baroness’s disagreement. She looked, moreover, almost her usual self—a woman forever slender who had changed little in growing older by degrees. Little veins formed a blue mesh across her colourless eyelids and temples, encompassing her bright, keen eyes.

“I’ll only receive my due,” she declared, “once I’m gone. Despite appearances, I tell you, I never fail to handle what needs handling… Goodbye now, my dear… Do remember, nobody is to come, least of all that kind, plump Julienne… Your little ones are doing well?… How lovely! Dash back to your fun…”

Taking his leave without hesitation, Olivier did as she genuinely pressed him to do. He bore away the distinct picture of her luminous countenance in the gloom of the spacious room, whose furnishings, wall-hangings and draperies were lost in calculated darkness. High above the party’s uproar and splendour, Baroness Saffre’s soul, betrayed only by her watchful eyes, seemed to slumber that evening, as ever, in a refuge of the dwelling, tenuous yet abiding like a perpetual flame.

On the floor below, the intermission had come to an end. Guests were filing back into the enormous hall where the play was staged. A delightful small drawing-room led to one of the entrances, creating between two doorways a kind of alcove within the sequence of stately rooms—a species of sitting-room, dressed in gentle fabrics and bedecked with blooms.

Leaning back against the doorway, young Renève, the Marquis, was restlessly twirling his elegant moustache, his penetrating stare fixed upon the facial gymnastics with which Catherine Saffre, tucked away in that small recess, animated her ongoing tête-à-tête with the Grand Duke. Indeed, he had no illusions—having borne the brunt of it himself—regarding the blanket aloofness the superb last daughter of the heroic line of Valdrenne affected towards all her would-be lovers. He knew for certain that whatever exchange Catherine was feigning such welcoming interest in could be nothing more than inconsequential frivolities. Nevertheless, he could not fight off the jealous exasperation that seized him as he watched her innocent yet tantalising posture liberally revealing her shape from that undersized seat, while the lofty travelling lord beamed down complacently.

However, Renève put on a façade of unconcern the moment he realised the extent to which he was laying himself bare to Tarsul's examination—the man was leaning against the far side of the wide doorway, eyeing him through a single lens with a sardonic expression that looked positively diabolical.

A tide of visitors swept past them. Now the Grand Duke of Esclavonia went by, bringing his charming interlocutor with him, stout but stately. A fresh swarm of society folk followed suit. Thereupon Renève, making the most of being able to draw near Tarsul, enquired in purposefully breezy tones:

“You planning to go back in?... Not a chance for me! It’s murderously tiring...”

“Hah!” the other scoffed, “it’s quite sufficient for their tastes: lies, formality, and make-believe. In society, they embrace only what’s false. Truth, in any form whatsoever, offends their sensibilities. In artistic matters they deem it scandalous; in scientific ones, ungodly; in social chat, merely cynical. Well, inside they’re getting something nebulous enough not to affect them in the slightest: here and there a refrain touching on love, but treating it like a fanciful diversion in Arcadian scenes that have never been real. And then the shepherds in question are actually young women in drag, which means the ladies can view it as something refined as a nunnery theatrical; and the gentlemen see it as so obviously bogus, so manufac-

tured that—on quite another level—it delights them just as much."

"Really, my friend, our set isn't as impervious to romantic realities as you make out. It's for love's sake that such numbers of men are stalking about this breeding ground of women in front of us. A moment ago I was watching and overhearing the couples drifting past me. And amongst all who remain within the age of possibility, however slim their chances of charming anyone, I overheard snippets, oblique references, fragments, telling pauses—every one alluding to matters of the heart. Males and females alike come out in society purely because they've got a romance to display, to rekindle, or to secure. The fact is, dinners, galas, balls—all fashionable entertainments are just courting grounds!... They're welcome to bore me senseless with their serious rationales, codes of courtesy, and duties of sociability that supposedly draw the quality together. To all that I'll eternally reply: Why do ladies bare their bosoms when they venture into fashionable circles? Why do the young blades of our set, whose unique employment and ceaseless care is pleasuring their inclinations, waste countless nights in reception

rooms where they're forced to sit through verse readings, rather than going straight to the professionals who cater to such pleasures? It's because everything we see spread before us in this hall is teeming with love—love to hunt out, to rouse or resurrect, to preserve or trade in, love to confess, love to enact… The single common basis for all worldly connections, the one unifying thread for this multitude assembled from all corners, and after all, the sole ingredient that makes up family, society, the universal order itself, is love!…

"Not at all," countered Tarsul, "it's money."

"Money? How so?"

"Have you any clear idea what the word 'armature' signifies?… It's what we call a metal skeleton that props up or keeps in place the flimsier or more yielding portions of an object. Listen closely! To keep families upright, to hold society together, to provide all these fine people with their impeccable carriage—there's an armature cast in sterling metal at work. Around this core, we drape the finery, the aesthetic touches, the façade—which is to say, our responsibilities, morals, affections that don't provide the resistance but rather wear thin, shift with the

times, and get renewed. This framework is rather well disguised, most often utterly imperceptible; but it alone keeps things from coming undone when mishaps strike, upheavals shake us, unexpected tempests blow in, when the tapestry of affection unravels and the frontage of moral codes or high-minded principles breaks open. These occasions alone, and then only temporarily, allow us rare glimpses into society's interior, the family's innermost workings or a couple's divide, revealing their exposed scaffolding, the financial tether. Still, we hasten to veil it with novel affections or principles fit for purpose. We swap out the decrepit conventions and torn commitments… Yet the framework has withstood the tremor! It abides forever, maintaining with exactitude the form and semblance of domestic hearths, ready to bear whatever refurbishment the worldly frontage needs."

The Marquis de Renève greeted what he was hearing with unmistakable doubt. The performance having finished, Tarsul used the moment to carry on, naming the succession of notable persons approaching them on their way out:

“Just look! The Duke de Gisors strutting about yonder —he who’s so exact about everyone’s entitlements and so liberal with his own—what link would you think connects him to Saffre other than the hundred thousand francs poured into the royalist campaign fund during the recent elections?… And there’s Monsieur de Saint-Andoche coming our way, hands tucked in his sleeves like a wizened sexton, flanked by Madame de Saint-Andoche, their son Raymond and their daughter de Saint-Andoche —absolute blue bloods and the height of high society, whose company is nearly unattainable and who shun all gatherings—still, they’ve turned up, mouths primly set, yet making their presence thoroughly felt. What ties them to Saffre other than his bequest of four hundred hectares on the Isle of Wight to the ousted Genovefans, without anyone looking too deeply into the source of this thus-purified fortune?… And what of the Prince de Marengo? What prompts him to flaunt his epic name here? It’s the prospect of continuing to lease, at half the bid price, the Vexin forest shooting rights the baron has lost interest in… And the Grand Duke of Sclavonia, you see? No need to dwell on it, he comes at a set price: fifty thousand flor-

ins gets you his company… Take my word for it, my good man, the assembly in this room has been paid for, somehow or other; and social ties, anywhere on earth, persist only through gain.

“Come now,” Renève protested, “there must still be some in our circles who are beyond purchase!…”

“Heavens! I won’t dispute there are capricious or tender-hearted types in society; but I recognise them in that lot, I number them as poppies or cornflowers among all the ears of corn. And even so, I’m overstating their numbers. Better yet, ask Baron Gedruc whether I’m mistaken—he’s coming this way and only days ago remarked to me with such shrewd affability: “I haf no idea how zat tefil Saffre does it, to get hold of ze top drawer folk?… Me, I can afford vriends only at ten thousand vrancs…” Indeed, high society can exhibit such peculiar whims, these petty prejudices; they turn on absolutely nothing, a simple matter of speech, say…”

Shaking his head, Renève observed:

“I know a great many more altruistic sorts amongst us than you give credit for!

— Quite right, there are the properly moneyed ones too. I separate out certain well-heeled persons who, having sated their thirst for riches, abandon themselves to nothing but hedonistic pursuits… There, perfectly timed —the Countess de Grommelain herself. I know full well what must fill her thoughts, and it's assuredly not her own welfare. But what's propping up her marriage? Self-interest all the same: that of Grommelain himself. This structural support runs between the two. But it goes unfelt by her, since all the tension pulls on him alone… Let me stress once more, the framework is what refuses to reveal itself, what disguises itself most scrupulously beneath pretty surfaces, rather like some grotesque inner necessity we cannot do without. Nothing short of total dismantling will make it visible; and typically, only a soothsayer could tell you where precisely it dwells in any given person, could trace where it begins for them and where it ends up… Take, for instance, that benevolent old chap there, the Legion of Honour tied about his neck. A man of learning, rather like a saintly figure minus the religion, who could exist on nothing but black radish, who desires nothing for his own sake; still, he has a

daughter, and would dearly like Baron Saffre to place his son-in-law in charge of the Manorès mines."

Tarsul kept on spotting and uncovering, throughout the pomp of this gathering, further individuals whose driving forces and purposes in life, filtered through his analysis, lent weight to his hypothesis.

"Take Jacques d'Exireuil," he added, nodding at a lanky youth with rugged, tanned features who had stopped close by, lost in thought… By what quirk of fate, what secret framework has he been lodged today in Baron Saffre's inner circle, quite possibly the lone soul here tonight oblivious to the arrangement?…

A small frown crossed Renève's forehead, indicating that the episode Tarsul hinted at had likewise caught his attention.

"What's he cooking up?" pressed the latter… "It's common knowledge he's besotted with his wife; it's always been believed she returns his affection in full. Previously they only ventured into society when it proved completely unavoidable. Yet from the moment his coal holdings went up in smoke, we've watched Exireuil become a fixture at every soirée, developing steady connections with Saffre,

to the point where tonight his wife looked for all the world like the lady of the manor!

— “Be that as it may,” Renève noted charitably, “I regard him as a chap of great integrity, delightful to be around, and extremely well-balanced.”

Tarsul pondered inwardly: “And you yourself, pretty young Marquis de Renève, do you really fathom what binds you to these circles of the fabulously rich?... The truth is your inbred seigneurial impulses persist in claiming the dues of former times, with only the self-importance of social climbers and the riches of plutocrats left to fulfil them. In the Saffre circle, they lavish upon you exquisite banquets, stately homes for your summer pleasure, and come winter, hunting on lands worthy of kings! ... And if you find yourself so smitten with the exquisite Catherine Saffre, it is because, moreover, you think it only fitting to wrest her from that oaf she married, and possibly unbeknownst to yourself, you would be delighted to obtain ‘all the perks’ free of charge, from these people who so regularly wine, dine and shelter you.

Tarsul might well have gone on: “And what of me, me, Tarsul! What on earth would hold me here among these

creatures I hate, disdain yet envy, were it not to peddle my exclusive learning, to serve as their tour guide in the land of refinement, aesthetic values and becoming ideas—me, the virtuoso of collectibles, sought after by these profligate simpletons, me, Tarsul, the Grand Counsellor to those with deep pockets!"

... In the midst of these reflections, the evening's entertainment was drawing to a close.

Baron Saffre stood in the doorway of the front salon, distracted by a particular worry, yet continuing to accept compliments whilst trading parting pleasantries with a few lingering guests still expecting their coaches.

Giselle d'Exireuil, whilst her husband busied himself bringing round the club carriage, was about to take her leave too, swathed in a flowing mantle of Tibetan mohair, whose luxuriant snowy thickness encircled her neck like a nimbus, setting off her delightfully wistful face.

Saffre sought her out behind the door-leaf where she had positioned herself against the wind that whooshed in each time someone passed to or from the street.

“Again before long, I trust?” he told her… “I shall dream of nothing but you!… See if you can spare me a thought as well!…”

And he pressed her fingers, not unkindly intended, though with the unthinking force of a man staking his claim upon her, which was indeed what preoccupied him at that very moment.

“Oh! You’re hurting me!” she exclaimed in a low voice, with a sudden wincing of her features, as the baron hastened to apologise, and driven by a quick tide of ache, embarrassment and fear, a pair of tiny tears welled up to hover at the rims of the young woman’s great blue eyes.

II

The Countess de Grommelain

Marie-Blanche de Grommelain, Arthur Saffre's younger sibling and the firstborn of the baron's daughters, belonged to that class of high-society women whose day-to-day agenda, when all is said and done, distinguishes itself from that of a kept woman's only once evening arrives. Women of this sort consecrate their mornings to a leisurely, late-starting levée and the worshipful tending of their physical form. The post-noon period habitually draws them, for no small part of its span, into what a 'meeting', in the understood sense, might conjure of the most egregious flouting of the ninth commandment and the most gamesome of natural pursuits. However, with the approach of dusk, they are summoned to regain their thorough sense of social pro-

priety. Those of the demimonde, once evening falls, have only the option of killing time until bed by joining their own sort, cast out from polite circles, or withdrawing to sites of popular pleasure, the theatrical venues, the wanton balls, the parties thrown for gallant adventures. Quite the reverse, when evening sets in, high-society women of the Countess de Grommelain's ilk finally see the formal grandeur of social life spread out before them. Usually it is to claim their seat at a select gathering to which they have been bidden, to sweep openly into a reception of the haute monde, that they outfit themselves afresh pre-dinner—for another time that day. They step into such settings earnestly, soberly, at the ready to voice, in the proper register, the patronising, approving or stern pronouncements one ought to make there about individuals and affairs. The night flows by, furnishing them solely with opinions that are commonly applauded in their milieu. The fact is, they seize upon off-the-shelf notions as they fly past, having found no time during the day to manufacture any original thoughts on any matter, and in any case harbouring passionate beliefs, lively recollections and fresh anecdotes solely concerning subjects they

dare not raise before so decorous a gathering. And to crown the respectability of their night-time hours, as they retreat to their quarters, they never take an outsider—and hardly ever their own husband—into their bed.

On that particular morning, Marie-Blanche de Grommelain found herself beset by one of life's most irritating concerns: a falling-out with her principal lady's maid, who was presently styling her hair in front of the full-length mirror.

"If I'm pleased with you," the lady of the house was saying, "what need have you to trouble about the rest?"

She used the intimate 'tu' with this servant, who had waited on her since her youngest days in her father's home.

"Never!" the woman groused, "one would be the wretchedest creature alive to suffer the way his lordship has come to treat me as a matter of course!"

The Countess de Grommelain, her physical graces hidden shapeless in her morning gown, had only the allurements of her head to admire, emerging as it did from the fabric. With little fretful shivers, she swivelled her thin, pale neck with its soft down, inspecting from

every direction—face-on, from behind, right and left—the curls and waves of her burnished chestnut mane, caught between the hand mirror's reflection and that of the standing glass. She flung terse comments at her maid while watching what the woman did to her hair, the way one listens sideways, seeming absorbed solely by her reflection.

"D'you suppose my husband's come upon some reason to be cross with you?"

In the exchanges between the lady and her maid, the class distinction in confidential affairs was upheld by Marie-Blanche solely through her refusal to make explicit or unequivocal acknowledgements of her improprieties. She had preserved, like a last redoubt of haughty defence, the option of seeming not to grasp her meaning if, in the unthinkable shame of a dispute, her chambermaid should ever affront her with an insinuation. There was left to her the recourse of casting out the traducer with one of those imperious displays of righteousness that can still cause those subjected to them to second-guess even the plainest facts. Still, the Countess de Grommelain had never scrupled about what damaging insinuations could be

transmitted to a domestic through the tenor of injunctions and warnings, whilst assigning to her alone the handling of her correspondence both arriving and departing. Then too, did not the young lady offer sufficiently instructive physical proof of her activities when, coming home to change for dinner, she required undressing whilst unable to pretend she had been at her couturier's for a fitting? The maid immediately understood, from how a clasp, a ribbon or a corset-string looked, what someone else's hands had recently bungled in attempting what hers had expertly done.

"Doubtless," the maid responded, "the Count must take it amiss that I consider myself beholden before all else to her ladyship!"

Such a discreet yet worrying reply it was. The words pricked at the Countess de Grommelain's most sensitive nerve: her horror of becoming the object of her husband's suspicion and persecution. In no time, she set her mind racing, conjuring up the most fanciful grounds for worry. She pestered her chambermaid with endless queries, to the point of charging her with having made herself suspicious through some dim-witted clumsiness. Could it have

been an awkward attempt at concealing a letter when fetching or delivering it, whilst the Count was about?… or else some equivocal fashion of addressing an innocent inquiry about Madame that Monsieur had occasion to make?… All Marie-Blanche got were woolly retorts and disingenuous protestations. She felt her temper rising as she flailed about desperately. The tiniest alert regarding her conjugal peace cast her into that pusillanimous condition where knowing oneself not utterly safe from all harm suffices to make one apprehend every possible calamity.

Without warning she went quiet, and acting on impulse, she rifled through the open drawer of a rosewood davenport, pulling out her morphine syringe from a muddle of shell hairpins, chainlets, hair curlers, and dainty diamond collar clasps.

“Mercy!” the chambermaid burst out, “were it not for the deference I owe Madame la Comtesse, I would have dashed that nasty stuff to bits ever so long ago!…”

In silence, Marie-Blanche had drawn aside her morning robe; and beneath the fabric, against her flesh, with the golden needle’s end, she was finding a spot on her hip

to pierce. She nipped at her lip and let her eyelids fall during that short, vicious instant. And, smiling now in anticipation of the ease that would shortly suffuse her being, she acknowledged the humble admonishments still being heaped upon her by declaring:

“See that you let me be… Come, come! My hair’s quite done… What delays you from seeing to my slippers?”

“No, no,” persisted the maid, crouched in her ministrations, “Madame la Comtesse hasn’t a notion of the frightful outcomes she’s risking!… A friend of mine worked for a lady who’s certainly no longer living, I’d wager. Her injections, which she likewise gave herself, had left her skin riddled with pustules that appeared no better than smallpox to the naked eye. And as for her wits, for the better part of each day, one could safely say she’d practically lost them all. The most searing bath, she’d cry out it was stone cold! And such absurdities as defied belief, especially from one so well-born as she!… My friend couldn’t so much as stay on in that post…”

The Countess de Grommelain gave a dismissive shrug as she finished dressing for the midday meal.

Already two years had elapsed since morphine's corruption had crept into her being, born of idle curiosity whilst engaged in a passing dalliance with a cousin of her husband's, an embassy attaché perverted by the interminable boredom of service in Persia. This toxin of deceit and delight, of swift oblivion, appeared tailor-made for her, to stuff with falsity and line with yielding comfort the rough corners of realities Marie-Blanche could not bear to touch. Inside her petite cranium, where no room existed for abilities that allow one to plan ahead, be patient, or deny oneself, there raged the impetuosity of impulse, the demand for immediate yielding and consent, the craving for a fairy godmother's wand to have every wish granted straight away. Never once had she known a whim without instantly pursuing its gratification, nor suffered an affront without throwing herself into acts of revenge or—too weak for such—into acrid ventings of her spite. Morphine had presented itself in her fortune as a beneficent protectress. The sensory illusion it bestowed enabled her to banish vexing realities and lent her wings to speed ahead to fancied encounters with whatever she wished for.

After the head servant's summons, when Marie-Blanche entered the dining room, she discovered her husband and their two boys awaiting her, the elder ten years old, the younger seven. It was established procedure, whenever they dined without company, for the governess to entrust the children to their parents for the length of the repast. The little ones' presence served to soften any potential for awkward intimacy. First greetings were traded by the four diners at the very moment of being seated.

"Have you been out riding today?" Marie-Blanche asked.

Grommelain signalled yes; and only after a pause did he volunteer:

"The Wood was most agreeable."

Another quiet spell occurred; then the Countess began anew:

"Which of our set did you see?"

"Oh! Scores of them!..."

"But who in particular?" she pressed, determined to make her husband open up verbally and betray, in the

sound of his voice, whatever ulterior thoughts might be barricaded inside him.

“All right!” he rejoined, “let’s see… Epernon… Icheuldorff… the Marquis de Fé… Garoguigalo… Elioboth… little Arcole…”

This inventory included not a single name that Grommelain, in relation to his wife’s past or present circumstances, might have been warranted in pronouncing with a shrewd grimace or insinuating look. Not one of the characters named, in fact, had ever meant anything to the Countess, not even qualifying as what she distinctly called her “little flirts”, namely those protagonists of fleeting escapades with her, preserving the label of lover for more enduring arrangements with some permanent confederate in intrigue and pleasure.

There was actually someone Marie-Blanche almost enquired after, wondering whether he had not also shown himself along the equestrian paths. But such was simply temptation from the devil, a wicked inclination towards defiance, considering that within two hours hence, she would be at liberty to ask that someone himself all about it. And, as though Grommelain could have divined

behind her forehead this name-question poised to spring, she said with hasty delight at the thought of putting him off track:

“You didn’t spot Papa?”

“No!” the Count rejoined brusquely, “and it struck me as odd…”

“Why so?”

“Because the d’Exireuils were present.”

A smile crossed Marie-Blanche’s lips. This was obligingness towards her husband and malice towards the couple he had just named.

“Fancy that!” she remarked, “so they’ve managed to keep their horses?”

Grommelain gave one of those contemptuous shrugs that spreads the arms wide and carelessly elevates the shoulders—the sort of gesture that appears to cast off all concern for others, creating space around oneself through which their lots can slip away as they please, bound for wherever they choose.

The man was in his forties, his features even but exhausted, trimmed with small sandy whiskers and a delicate straw-coloured moustache. His demeanour—under

political circumstances more to his advantage—belonged to that class which would have singled out its possessor for ambassadorial posts, high administrative councils, or officially sponsored campaigns. This breed of nobility, held by France's current establishments beyond the doors of power, has acquired a tan from its banishment; and coarsening faces under skies they were not born for, darkening them with wind and rain, this category of gentleman has gone forth to construct, with time on their hands and on grander scales, the patrician caste of sport. Count Grommelain possessed a chilly, sharp-edged manner. As a rule, nothing seemed to stir his anger save talk of political matters. Yet at such times, in assessing the deeds and figures of government, the most savage expressions leapt readily to his speech. Below the sleek little partings of his dwindling hair, grey eyes threw off sparks in time with his convulsive repugnance, with the obscene terms apt for characterising the scoundrelous condition in which he envisioned the opposition's plotting. Life's inevitable lapses of character, examples of loose morals he might observe amongst his set, news of popular felonies, calamities, or even press accounts of dogs squashed

by vehicles—none of this roused him from his well-cushioned seeming indifference except through the lens by which he perceived it as governmental fallout and an ominous portent of the age.

“In this morning’s Echoes,” he proceeded in an offhand manner, “there’s a bombastic write-up about the hunting outfit your father has put together.”

“Really!” Marie-Blanche remarked with comparable nonchalance, recognising the brewing of yet another storm of spite, a variety all too common in their household.

“Oh yes! They’ve gone into considerable detail… Word has it the whipper-in will be Baron Saffre’s second son-in-law, M. Olivier Bréhand, that celebrated sportsman… Ah! And there’s a gracious nod to me too. They note that the Baron’s hardly left unprepared, what with having a spare son-in-law to hand over his hounds to; and they go on about my qualifications in that regard.”

Marie-Blanche did not miss this opportunity, which came at no cost to her, to prove herself more her husband’s wife than her father’s daughter, by making his complaint her own.

“I believe I’ve stated clearly enough how poorly Papa has acted towards you in this affair.”

“You should have said as much to him,” Grommelain snapped back… “And been quite firm about it!… After all, you’re his daughter, you’ve got every right to speak your mind!”

“Father won’t put up with anything I say now…”

“And to what do we owe this, may I ask?”

“Because following your disputes and your aloofness with him, he’s suspicious of my comments, thinking you’re prompting me since you’re barred from saying them yourself.”

Grommelain had attended to his wife’s allegations with hostile interest. He collected himself briefly, as though choosing from on high among the multitude of retorts at his disposal. But he opted for contempt:

“Apparently your brother-in-law Olivier is a natural-born hunter. Good Lord! It’s right there in black and white. I’m still quite amazed!… Natural-born?… So that would suggest he’s had hunt servants in his lineage, or he springs from a race of beaters!” the Count ended super-

ciliously, with that smile fashioned not of lips, but of bared teeth.

Marie-Blanche felt already a little eased, foreseeing that the tempest would not thunder forth on the subject approached in this way, and was spending itself, for the time being, in sheet lightning.

“Yes,” she insisted, “Father has acted badly, very badly!… But you do realise that this business of indulging Olivier is to compensate Julienne for the liberties Papa enjoys through her…”

“Pshaw! There you go!… Tch!… Good grief!”

These exclamations, reinforced by Grommelain’s disdainful pantomime, might be rendered as follows: “How is any of this my responsibility? Have I stopped you from doing as your sister does? When have I ever thwarted you? When your mother’s health keeps her in her chamber, haven’t I given you carte blanche to entertain your father, and to organise dinners with Madame d’Exireuil to his heart’s content, or with Princess Nagear if that’s more to his taste, or with the Sultan’s entire entourage if you so desire?…”

The boys, placed at the two ends of the table, sitting opposite each other, kept quiet, aware they were not allowed to talk, and besides, they had no wish to. Heads down over their plates and minds deep in their own small musings, they glanced up only from time to time with their bright eyes to focus on whichever of the two was presently making themselves heard. And this was how—in keeping with the principle of allowing children some involvement in family matters, which Count de Grommelain upheld as a matter of tradition—they were expected that morning to form, under parental supervision, early notions about their Uncle Olivier, their Aunt Julienne, and their dear old grandfather.

Once lunch was over, they were quietly sent away, and their parents adjourned to the connecting room, where coffee was ready.

The room was a small parlour of eighteenth-century Oriental taste, styled in Pompadour chinoiserie; the brainchild of Tarsul, who had skilfully sourced each piece of furniture, each bibelot, to create this harmonious arrangement. Grommelain was apt to reply, appearing rather beleaguered, when praised for this wonder: “I’m

well aware what all this has cost!" Yet this was expressing himself inaccurately and too categorically: he knew exactly only what he himself had paid for it. Besides, nobody knew for sure about secret commissions that some suspected Tarsul of charging the Saffre family members, unbeknownst to them, on the refined journey of finds and costly choices where he acted as their chosen guide. The greater number limited themselves to imputing to him some jiggery-pokery, by means of a common term as inexact as the practice it purported to define. And all agreed, at any rate, that he charged less than Baron de Niéfan did the Happarsheims, and than Count de Girliat, who served as arbiter of taste for the Gedrucs.

Marie-Blanche lay half-extended on a creation of gilded wood and supple silk, of such capricious and airy design that it looked less meant for sitting upon than for gazing at. She regarded, stealthily, Grommelain who, without sparing her a glance, was taking his coffee in tiny gulps, standing by the window with the rosy spots on his cheeks that betrayed a state of digestive contentment.

It was a pressing demand of her agitated state to find out without delay whether she was entangled or not in

the unknown grievance that the master of the house was holding against the lady's maid, if the servant was to be believed. Yet just then, she was suddenly realising how much difficulty even the most minor spousal discussion now created for her, simply to broach. Since her husband had for a while now observed towards her a rigorous practice of physical distance, she was without the advantage of pouting tactics through which a woman can get herself coaxed into revealing what she is most eager to tell. And, to finally carry the day, the most useful and foolproof of feminine strategies was in this way barred to her. Nonetheless, by instinctively resorting to the lone moral device she knew how to operate, she struck flirtatious poses with enticing airs, although Grommelain, with his back presented, could not see her putting on this show in his honour.

The frame and layout of this confined drawing room seemed, however, deliberately selected to bring out Marie-Blanche's physical attributes in the most flattering way. Here, above all places, the perverse magnetism of that willowy frame—through which the impulse to beguile men twisted from feet to crown—felt at home,

within this curious petite splendour where foreign ingenuity, refined by French skill, carried an air of daring caprice and corrupted elegance. Marie-Blanche's irises, all but violet, more lavender than blue, under lids peculiarly tilted at the outer points, appeared to be the animated embodiment, the very gaze of this bizarre décor. Her exceptionally fine waist was made womanly only at the cost of severe corseting, squeezed between slim hips and the chest of a young wiry tumbler. Her disquieting suppleness of body allowed her to merge effortlessly with the cushions, upon fabric surfaces whose lustre was so sharply assaultive to the eye that the hand was startled to find them subsequently so silky beneath one's touch. Lastly, her fragile and anguished features seemed born of some race meant to dwell only amongst these pieces whose golden timber was frantically shaped, facing these ethereal candle-holders that writhed their bronze in some fabulous ecstasy. In the end forced, by her husband's lack of attention, to broach the subject herself, Marie-Blanche did so hesitantly.

'My chambermaid finds herself greatly perplexed,' she ventured, 'by a certain hostility which she may be wrong

to think comes from you… Is there indeed a reason you're making her service disagreeable and inflicting her grievances upon me?'

Grommelain muttered a few unintelligible words, without yet facing her.

'I do prize her highly, through long custom,' the countess added artfully… 'Still, I cannot but yield to your motives… if indeed you have them… for finding fault with her?…'

'Just recently,' he answered at last, averting his gaze from his wife, ' I happened upon her nattering, at quite an unseemly volume, with the valet, the footman, all the downstairs lot she'd set guffawing with foolish, vulgar gossip about this house…'

'What exactly was she telling them?' Marie-Blanche pressed urgently, with that faint-hearted boldness made up entirely of hope and the urge to be done with fear.

'Oh! Let's drop the matter!… Anyway, her or someone else, they're all of a piece. Keep her on. Best not to make way for a newcomer…'

'Yet I would certainly have the right to be told…'

‘Thoroughly distasteful!’ Grommelain uttered in lieu of a proper response, shaking his head and making off.

Just before slipping away, he finished his pronouncement by denoting what ranked, to his mind, as the supreme tier of offences people might commit, or visit upon you, during one’s days:

‘And worst of all, far too noisy!’ he announced, his head reappearing between the twin leaves of the door which, at that, he pulled shut in his wake.

The Countess de Grommelain lingered a moment, cast down by her helplessness to get past guesswork concerning what her husband could have chanced to hear, and what he might now be imagining. She resolved to get to the bottom of things with the maid, should she prove able to elicit anything at all. In any case, the ambiguity surrounding this business was already causing her less distress; it was growing somewhat similar to that state in which, although never unmindful of a troublesome tooth, one hardly bothers with it in the lulls between attacks. Moreover, the clock showed quarter past two, and she had scarcely time left to make herself presentable and be off.

Before long she left by one of the house's lesser entrances, giving onto the rue Vasco-de-Gama and principally connecting to a mezzanine suite where the Grommelain children lived with their governess. This was her habitual passage whenever she had not had the horses put to; conversely, once seated in her conveyance in the yard, she would exit by the porte-cochère on the avenue Kléber.

When she turned the right angle into the nearest street, she confirmed with a look—without even needing to crane her neck—that she was not being followed; and she leapt into a hackney carriage she had just signalled. Not that she was making for anywhere particularly far-flung. The little street-level flat Roger d'Iancey had roughly set up for their encounters was part of a newly erected house in one of the neighbouring streets which descend from the avenue d'Iéna to the Seine. Hence, as a passenger who knows to the sou what the trip to her habitual address costs, she paid only thirty sous, without gratuity, hastily slipped into the driver's hand. And now, facing a doorway that retreated into a recess of the vault-

ing, she turned a key left ready in the lock to quicken thereby the caller's escape indoors.

Roger had only been expecting her for a minute, and still he had had to absent himself for this short while from the garrison where he was serving. He was attired as a lieutenant, spurs upon his heels, in this tiny retreat comprising a little sitting room and little bedroom, draped in red Turkey cloth and outfitted with hussar-like swiftness with some furniture emanating an unpretentious aroma of deal.

'Would you believe,' Marie-Blanche started off saying to him, 'I've just had an instant where I was certain my husband had found out everything!...'

Pah!' Roger scoffed, helping her off with her veil, her hat, her jacket and her gloves.

He was accustomed to welcoming with a robust, good-looking officer's smugness this type of menacing news, which the young woman habitually delivered in the opening gasps of her arrival. She herself did not dwell on it. She was most especially hasty to quickly discuss what each of them had succeeded in detecting the previous

night, at that dining party, between one of the company and Princess Nagear.

'Seriously?' she probed, 'don't you sense there's something happening?'

Roger found himself reluctant to speak, held back by that male incredulity concerning all that women dare permit themselves, making it rash indeed to profess views contrary to those of the fair sex. To be honest, it is really down to a mean-spirited reluctance to acknowledge another man's conquests rather than any genuine bonhomie.

"Well, I must say!" Marie-Blanche continued, "as for your Princess Nagear—I tell you, I wouldn't put my dog in her hands!..."

"Oh! No one's discovered anything particularly damning about her, have they?..."

"Personally, I need only glimpse that carroty mane and those great bovine eyes Cébré insists on calling 'gazelle-like,' which certainly do remind one of something one's seen elsewhere... in the Zoological Gardens."

"None of which prevents her from being very attractive."

"That doesn't prevent me wanting to know precisely what made her abandon her prince of a husband, either."

Roger retorted with that man-of-the-world tone that serves to underwrite, on one count anyway, a woman's moral standing:

"Simply because he hadn't two brass farthings to rub together."

"Then who exactly foots the bill for the princess's lodgings… her gowns… the smart carriage you and my husband rode in to the Folies-Bergère, while Micheline and I were left cramming ourselves into my coach with Lucierre and that oversized bundle of Cébré?"

"Why! She may have salvaged some of her own money…"

"Ah, right! Her own money—I can guess exactly where that's banked!" Marie-Blanche burst out, convulsing with laughter and sinking back against the low cushion of the divan where she had arranged herself.

Dropping to his knees, Roger moved his face towards his lover's, yet she kept him back by his whiskers—bristling and elongated—which she set about twisting purposefully at both ends with her elegant fingertips.

“Now we chat!” she ordered… “You were unwilling to believe Renève was making advances to my sister-in-law Catherine. Well then! He’s besotted, darling!… He went quite mad with rage over the party at Father’s where she’d done the honours for the Grand Duke. He’d been all set to depart for Florence for two weeks; but he grew so affronted, so murderously cross that… that… he cancelled everything!”

“Good Lord!”

“Absolutely not. I’d put my hand in the fire that there’s nothing to it.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I couldn’t say… I can’t quite express it… I simply know it’s not true. Pure instinct…” “Come now! You naughty thing, do be good!” she chided playfully, as if teasing a favourite pet, tugging at his moustache to draw Roger’s mouth away… “There, there! We’ve more to chat about…”

Speaking in such chaotic surroundings, amidst that atmosphere of wayward existence, surrounded by looking-glasses that caught only images of impropriety, meant limiting oneself beforehand to whatever concerns

those walls whispered about. And the conversation turned to Meursault vis-à-vis Madame Wien, Baron Saffre with respect to Madame d'Exireuil. They paired off the Count and Viscount de Chazerlay, two brothers, with Madame Seygre-Ronne; whilst the Marquise de Ringemont was said to be everyone's. Micheline de Lizure was paired with Lucierre; Marie-Blanche's chambermaid, for all her age, with the little footman, no doubt; and the General's wife, Madame Trarara, with the young priest employed as her son's preceptor.

And in the excessive familiarity of their exchange, despite the well-worn pleasure Marie-Blanche still found in yielding to her lover's physical dominance, she was needling him with those mindless gestures that create what one might call a carry-on, when Roger suddenly let slip this remark:

"Speaking of which, I forgot to mention they're planning to marry me off!…"

Marie-Blanche assumed he was joking.

"You can't be serious?" she said, though her face already betrayed slight irritation.

“Not in the least. In fact, it appears to be becoming rather serious.”

“What do you mean! It’s been afoot!… You’ve been keeping it secret! And you’ve the cheek to throw this in my face just like that!…”

Fairly ill at ease, Roger sought to control his voice with a note of intimate cordiality.

“Daft thing!” he muttered, “you surely understand you’re the first person I’d turn to for counsel, the moment it became more than just talk… My mother’s been scheming the entire affair; and she only told me this morning that it was progressing well, rather far along actually…”

Marie-Blanche said nothing, nettled, possibly more hurt by the roughness of the delivery than by the actual news, though that too seemed somehow rather insulting.

“Care to hear who we’re talking about?”

She signalled that she did not care either way, that she was not forbidding it.

Roger revealed it was Mademoiselle de Laterrencoux.

“Laterrencoux-Groëme?” she asked, staring wide-eyed.

“Not that one: Laterrencoux-Vaucluse.”

"The youngest of the duchess's girls, so?"

"That's right."

Marie-Blanche was staggered by how momentous this alliance he spoke of was for him. She possessed too keen a sense of worldly dealings for the prospect of uniting with the Laterrencoux not to present itself to her judgement as a fait accompli, to be accepted forthwith, blindly if need be, rather like diplomatic unions… She wished at once to know all the ins and outs of how the business had developed, to assure herself that the scheme was no longer in much danger of failing… She understood, what is more, that she faced no danger of being humiliated in her social circle, for the notion of being cast aside did not apply to situations like these, to which all must yield, and where it was positively chic to be particularly and publicly obliged to do so… Marie-Blanche found herself pervaded by emotion; she moved her forehead in that sensation which fosters gratitude in creatures for the stage things have at last attained in their presence. And she murmured with loving softness:

"Even so, we've lasted two and a half years, you and I!"

In her heart of hearts, she would have denied just then having peppered this interval with more than one ‘petit flirt’, discreet and tucked away like violets. Roger took her in his arms and kissed her. She put up no further resistance; she was moved by remembrance, and completely enfeebled by this type of disturbance that was happening to her. She foresaw, in a preliminary glimpse, the intricate, taxing and worthy role that was hers, a magnificent lead whose outfits were already outlining themselves in her mind, and whereby she was suddenly linked to the Laterrencoux-Vaucluse in society’s theatre.

Roger was stirred by the charming agreeableness with which she was at present reconciling herself to his impending marriage. Yes, Marie-Blanche was exactly what he had counted on finding, not a mistress so much as a proper good friend. He too was bursting with affectionate demonstrations. She at length abandoned herself to his arms, with more tenderness and bewilderment than he had ever known her capable of, responding to what he too, just then, manifested more strongly than ever towards her, out of decency, out of liberal gratitude, as a man of society.

“My dear one!” she sighed… “Sweet dear one!”

A wisp of sincere emotion filmed her lilac-coloured eyes. She drew Roger tight against her heart, seized by one of those rushes typical of her fashionable character that became vaguely human only when she was moved to her absolute depths. Marie-Blanche uttered quietly, with discreet apprehension, as though she were acknowledging the part of Roger that was already the Laterrencoux-Vaucluse heir-by-marriage:

“Suppose I didn’t fancy you getting married… you wouldn’t go through with it?”

He calmed her with a kiss bountiful enough to declare: “Indeed! Need you ask? Heavens above!” All, indeed, that she could wish to hear.

“It won’t keep us from carrying on loving each other like this, should we want to?” she noted besides.

As befits a fellow with social graces, he said:

“Naturally.”

At which point, the habit of checking the time having reclaimed him, he became aware he should have taken his leave much earlier.

"Tonight then!" Marie-Blanche put in, as he made his swift adieus… "I hope it hasn't slipped your mind that you're dining at home with us?"

"What's arranged?"

"It's up in the air. Big Cébré's arranged to get us a box for half a dozen."

Once by herself, Marie-Blanche attempted for a moment to think, though in her this operation consisted of surveying her feelings in disorderly fashion.

The immediate tomorrow that was enough to keep her alive, the instant perspective that gave direction to her designs, consisted of the evening's entertainment at the Variétés, the Palais-Royal, or perhaps the Bouffes. Whatever the choice, Princess Nagear would miss it, being tied up with an important dinner at her country's embassy. In terms of female company, the aged Vicomtesse d'Haringier was not worth considering, although Marie-Blanche always made sure to proclaim that she would not entrust even her dog to her. The young woman consequently viewed herself as all but the lone female, queening it over four men, amongst whom, true enough, was her husband. And yet, could Lionel de

Forléans legitimately be treated as a man?... So tender in years, practically a child still, albeit rather handsome, who seldom had the nerve to talk to women and who, desperate to get near Marie-Blanche—he was afire with love for her; one would stake everything on it! afire with love—would surely spend the evening talking, poor little thing, with Grommelain. At least there remained, to take up considerable space, the venturesome Cébré, whose sober aspect consisted of making ladies laugh so heartily they could not resent his liberties. And lastly, paramount to everything, Marie-Blanche would have present, would display before public scrutiny Roger d'Iancey next to her, her Roger of moments ago, whose magnetism was thoroughly renewed, who unexpectedly assumed, with such force, the new distinction of being the jeune premier in tomorrow's most fashionable betrothal saga. And she felt a glowing pride, facing the looking-glass, while putting her unruly tresses back in order, to reflect upon how this very same Roger, champion of the season's upcoming spectacular marriage, had just rumpled her hair like a perfect savage.

The tidings, so thoroughly Parisian in character, now suffusing her entirely, coursed through her system restoratively and acted, for the time being, as a morphine injection. But a feverishness impelled Marie-Blanche to gauge on someone else the effect of this secret from which she drew such comfort. Furthermore, she wanted some pursuit for what was left of the afternoon.

She had touched up her face with powder and put her little veil back on. She went out, caught another carriage, and had it take her to her sister-in-law Catherine's. The address was rue Vaneau, that old family seat of the Valdrennes which Baron Saffre had procured for his son Arthur, whilst simultaneously the family's daughter was given to him in marriage.

There, the Countess de Grommelain could always count on a warm reception. The two sisters-in-law, nonetheless, maintained no essential closeness in their way of life. Still, the sheer contrast in their dispositions saved them from any occasion to upset one another.

"I've dropped by to see," said Marie-Blanche, "whether you'd care to make a tour of the couturiers with me."

First-rate neutral ground for the two young women. Catherine, with that laziness about beautifying herself which the knowledge of their invincible beauty sustains in certain women, was rather fond of being stirred from it, hustled along by encouragement. And Marie-Blanche proved, on these forays into finery, a sprightly and diverting guide thanks to her demi-mondaine experiences and her wizardry with dress.

As Catherine primped and the horses were being put to, Marie-Blanche could not contain herself, after a few opening remarks, from sharing under pledge of secrecy the society affair in the making.

“You don’t say!” exclaimed Catherine, without managing to hide her artless amazement that her sister-in-law’s air, in breaking this matrimonial news, was not that of a wake.

Marie-Blanche did not so much as blink. She was not required to clarify the nature of her liaison with Roger, nor to make a fool of herself—no doubt—with empty protests of their virtue. Moreover, she chiefly delighted in appearing inscrutable and irreproachable in manner, in a shadowy blend of finesse and gravity, superior to the flat-

tering circumstances she believed had been arranged for her.

"I'm ever so happy," she said, "about what's befalling Roger in this way, as he's such a fine, such a precious friend of mine."

And as Catherine protested that it was all the same a tremendous catch for Lieutenant Roger d'Iancey to have won his way at one stroke into the ducal house of Laterrencoux, Marie-Blanche stood up for him, hand to breast, on the heart side:

"I've always found Roger to possess high-minded ideals… He could only have made a match like this, where all is combined: splendid name, splendid status, splendid riches!"

Eventually, throughout the two young women's excursion to Sophie's stores, as well as to Marn's and Noisine's, the Countess de Grommelain failed to show that unselfish eagerness where she usually appeared to seek above all and almost uniquely what might befit Catherine. At other times, with a rather perverse attentiveness, possibly through hints of unwitting pimping, she would meddle to assess herself the effect of the presented cloths on her sis-

ter-in-law's form, atop her dress. And typically she would devise ways to drape them there, like garments of temptation, setting their folds in motion through her nimble fingers, at whose tips must course a trace of her libertine ways. But on this day, Marie-Blanche minded only her own affair; she was hunting for inspiration for the kind of gowns—unspokenly needed— that a mistress might commission to dazzle tastefully at her sweetheart's wedding.

Down the rue de la Paix, the two young ladies' conveyance passed that of Bourbebaux, who had Fompagne with him. The other carriage sped past, presenting through the see-through square of the door, in the window's little frame, a hasty masculine vignette, a fractional glimpse of clubmen. It was, one might say, a still-life apparition, featuring only hand-held gloves, cane handles, ringed fingers, ashen-tipped glowing cigars with nail glints amid their smoke, set against glossy hats and extinct expressions.

Marie-Blanche instantly leaned to her glass to dispatch a smile their way, tokens of amity. One and the other of these men—being members of the same club—

had been, in auspicious circumstances, in bygone ventures of their audacity, similar "little flirts" for her. In the course of ordinary worldly encounters where she often met them, they stirred in her less than a memory, just an unexpected reminiscence, weightless and comical. Yet at this moment when her zest for life was so intensely heightened, Marie-Blanche felt an insane urge that these men should have forthwith mentioned her, placed her name upon their lips again, drawing it out with improprieties. There flowed through her a vainglorious rage to feel herself forever mistress of all the men who had had her. It was this that put back in her mind the notion of her husband.

"My brother—is he still mad about you?" she launched into conversation with her sister-in-law.

"Who knows?" Catherine answered, laughing... "He doesn't think it useful to remind me each day..."

"But does he show it?"

"Why this sudden curiosity?"

"Because in my case, my husband!... Goodness! I'd have ample cause to be hurt by how he treats me...

Frankly, I couldn't care less; but he's an absolute brute! …"

She stopped short, contemplating potential consequences concerning this impediment she had realised that same morning: the unfeasibility of having recourse, with one's spouse, to those soft-spoken justifications that clear one of all blame, or to those ardent demonstrations that would numb his distrust.

"Honestly," she carried on, "you'd be doing me a service by tactfully confronting him. You're entirely at liberty to seem completely aware that he's conducting himself in ways that scarcely enhance my esteem for his entitlements. Would you agree to argue this case?"

Catherine Saffre kept on laughing, but in a manner that had grown somewhat weary.

"Have I your word?" Marie-Blanche insisted.

"Well, so be it! Consider it promised."

They had pulled up at Mimlis's department store. The liveried servant had already unlatched their door. They stepped down to complete their tour of calls here. It was their ultimate destination today, like the last in a sequence of admission-free museums. Once more they

were going to behold another atelier in this realm of high fashion, ablaze with new shades, a haze of delicate lace, charged by the sorcery of feminine allure with a mystical air, whereas upon floors arrayed with the splendid materials meant to drape her, there materialised, by an inevitable contrast, the apparition of the nude feminine form.

III

Olivier Bréhand

Tarsul had arrived first at the Opera, settling into the Bréhands' box before them. To pass the time, he took a seat by the ledge, quite unconcerned. He put off scanning the auditorium for when there would be something genuinely worth seeing. Lips forming a perfect O, he huffed on his eyepiece, then rubbed and buffed it with his handkerchief, busying both hands as he lent half an ear to the current portion of act one, nodding along absently.

The box door soon parted again, admitting the head of Princess Nagear, her gaze under the gem-encrusted glory of her titian locks flooding in like an ebony flash of light.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "you're doing the honours, are you?"

Tarsul hurried to help her out of her coat, an immensely capacious thing dripping with furbelows. The coat had the grotesque shape of a treasure chest from which materialised, in all the accuracy of her dress and the fitted perfection of her corsage, a jewel in human form. This disrobing happened so suddenly that it gave off, mingled with perfume, an almost indecent sensation. For all his world-weariness, Tarsul could not help a rapturous little reflection at the instant he had made of the princess this proudly curved, high-spirited creature so generously décolleté:

“Heavens!... Embarking on world conquest tonight, then?”

“Oh please! You, whom fame grants such wit, please do me the courtesy of not talking rot!” she answered, regarding herself in the mirror while her fingers looked to be saying coquettish prayers over her triple string of pearls.

“No need for concern, I won’t impose. I understand precisely the degree to which I count for you.”

“Whatever do you mean by that?” she demanded, perched rather than properly seated on the small divan at the box’s far end.

A mirror was mounted above her, in which Tarsul observed himself while talking to her. With this kind of partner—namely himself—his conversational abilities were least at risk of drying up; years of experience had taught this watchful fellow that nothing quite equals your own reflected face for supporting all your remarks with approval and sharing your every laugh.

“I’m the sort,” he declared, “whom you wouldn’t care to have even as a mere uncle, as I’d not possess the advantage of being worth inheriting from. Yet should I, by persistent wooing, implore you on bended knee to regard me as though you might be just a little… my niece, you might bestow upon me this ultimate kindness, now and then, in passing moments… Such as later tonight, when heading for your carriage, by letting me escort you down the great staircase. I’ve a frame that makes no poor showing on stairs before the public eye. Consider too my boutonnière befitting an old rake who keeps up appearances, a host of quite splendid people who say ‘Evening,

Tarsul!’ as they go by, and this slightly short-sighted habit of mine of noticing only those persons with whom, for a lady careful of her image, it’s agreeable that her companion trade salutations…

All the while speaking thus playfully, Tarsul was twirling his clipped, sharp, pomaded whiskers, to which the merest twitch of his upper lip lent the hostile look of charging horns. He kept patting too at the scanty row of grey-steel hair skirting his brow, which left a great breadth of his crown quite hairless. A shortish beard-collar going round his face seemed to act as the chin-stay by which this ribbon of hair was kept fixed where it belonged. On the back of his head, a lone patch of hair, smoothed tight and gleaming with hair oil, gave his neck prominence and brought it to life, by means of a parting, with the funny yet disconcerting effect of a grimace that had somehow ended up back there.

“Such is all I reckon you might deign to grant me,” he resumed… “Am I showing undue self-importance in saying so?”

“By no means!” granted the princess, “and if I were ever to have the folly of acquiring an uncle, I assure you it

would be yourself… However, do say, Monsieur and Madame Bréhand don't appear to possess the politeness of being on time?"

"What would you have? They inhabit a world ignorant of time and timing, like real billing doves…"

Princess Nagear twisted her features in repugnance, whispering:

"How could anyone be lovey-dovey with that absolute elephant of a wife?"

"Pfft! Olivier's hardly the sensitive sort. He's of the most deplorable species of parvenu, those who haven't been sculpted by effort, honed through strife, or seasoned with time. Imagine the type of man who, with neither ancestry nor personal assets as excuse, lacking any semblance of being smitten, feels no scruple in wedding the wealth of so ill-favoured a creature, bringing to the match merely boots for cobbling and undergarments for the wash!… To be sure, I've never taken issue with queens espousing shepherds… Yet the queen ought to possess enough prettiness that one could reasonably imagine her in a pastoral romance with a charming and witty shepherd. Well, here, that's definitely not what we have… All

the same, isn't it proper that this pitiable fat monstrosity Julienne should discover in her husband robustness… and stomach for the cheerless chore she's hired him to do?… "

The princess put the question in an offhand manner:

"Does Monsieur Bréhand really command a very considerable fortune as yet? When all's said and done, his wife hasn't come into her inheritance yet…"

"Forgive me! I'm not talking about the torrent of millions that's bound to shower upon them eventually. I don't reckon with their future expectations. Especially since when immersed like Baron Saffre up to the neck in such a deluge of dealings, being a hardy swimmer won't do—one must also be sure of never cramping, of no disaster befalling… But currently, as things stand today, the position of the Bréhands, and likewise the Grommelains and Arthur Saffre's, is abundantly comfortable…"

"How much exactly?"

"Ah! That would be a whole computation to work out! …"

"Yet mightn't you indicate approximately?"

The princess suddenly put on a show of rapt attention to the arias then floating from the stage, at odds with the decidedly practical bent of her last few questions. Tarsul marked this to himself; and, engaging in a quick estimation, he reckoned up on his fingers:

"... Two million in liquid assets for dowry... the mansion on Cours-la-Reine... rights to the Ozerpie estate... yearly income of a hundred thousand francs... the gifts... the wheeling and dealing Baron Saffre always gets caught up in from showing off his largesse... There you have it, we're looking at circumstances worth close to two hundred thousand francs of steady income, to put it modestly!..."

"So Madame Bréhand wants her husband's love at that rate?"

"Absolutely. Once she gets here, please take note of how she conducts herself. Watch the goggling eyes of desire she turns on Olivier, the namby-pamby airs she employs to rub herself against her splendid male's shoulders..."

The princess protested, a wicked smile playing on her lips:

"Nevertheless, it's a year or two now since that hefty mama has been able to exhibit for months at the courses, at soirées, everywhere in Paris view, the new infant she was forever delivering."

"Well now, when it comes to having babies, that does seem a closed book for her. What's more, she's practically disfigured from the five children her husband so rapidly pulled out of her, to first assure the conservation of the money against every eventuality. Oh! infant plagues can strike, he could end up widowed, but the chap's got himself well protected!... Still, all that Julienne sees in this new phase of barrenness that's begun for her is that she's henceforth at liberty to dedicate every bodily leisure and all her robust bulk to her conjugal extravagances."

"My! my!" exclaimed the princess, "you're hardly kind to your friends!..."

"It's not that I've any marked dislike for Julienne Bréhand. I think well enough of her, quite frankly. Every so often, I'll own, she does make my ears burn a bit when, glutted with carnality and completely benumbed by marital clockwork, she inveighs against other ladies who, if they're known to be a touch frivolous, still handle such

matters with charming buoyancy. Ah! She's absolutely ruthless about those who offer her no worldly gain, and whom neither she nor her husband consider it worthwhile to spare! You ought to observe the blinkered manner, the self-assured pomposity with which she believes she can rank herself above that charming little Madame Wien, or our lovely friend Edmée whom that awful boor of a fellow… oh, Whatever-his-name… does indeed sometimes bring to tears most unseasonably, in polite circles. Yet these are women of quality, at least seemingly virtuous, reserved in their ways, with refined smiles and proper looks; whilst concurrently, Madame Bréhand bids us witness the depravity of her yearnings, on grounds that they enjoy matrimonial endorsement. She flaunts her vulgar stirrings, her swollen pleasures, with a gross, firmly-rooted belief in her right to show us an orderly and sanctioned performance. And, once the workings of her nature have received benediction, it never occurs to her to conceal their shamefulness from us, to veil them a little, to throw so much as a fig leaf over them!…"

"She must be appallingly jealous, mustn't she?"

“Put it this way: if the situation presented itself, she’d be pitiless. And that’s just what prevents Olivier from yielding to those temptations one observes in him, now and then, to treat himself to a more appetising dish than the home-cooked pot. His gallant impulses as a handsome devil clearly trouble him whenever agreeable ladies are nearby and his wife isn’t around to keep tabs. But the instant he finds himself under his spouse’s scrutiny, not a chance! He leaves the most charming person alive stranded, and beats a hasty retreat, utterly shamefaced, from any lady who could lead to his being unceremoniously tossed out with only the modest satchel holding his marriage portion…”

Upon this remark, the Bréhands had someone open the door to their box. In he walked, the very picture of elegance, in his English-fashioned formal wear, procured from the foremost tailor in London. From an appropriate remove, he cleaved his ceremonial face with a smile, his thick fair beard hiding the savage firmness of his jawline. And for the number of strides still needed to reach his hosts, he held his cuffs smooth against his palms, their buttons, matching those of his shirtfront, being above

mere richness, transcending luxurious: they were remarkably understated, as is fitting for one who would not dream of advertising his fortune on his linen, for such a canvas would be inadequate.

“We’re dreadfully behind time,” Julienne hurried to declare… “I’m to blame!” “At the eleventh hour, I still had my needy to tend to. I was obliged to write to the worthy Admiral’s wife, and forward a small report to the charity work which Madame de Saint-Andoche is good enough to want me to handle. We must spare a bit, mustn’t we? now and then, for the wretched… But pray, Princess, don’t keep to the back; the second act is underway, come and watch, it’s just the time when the house will be crowded…

Madame Bréhand sported a rich scarlet ensemble; and with her rubicund complexion, her aigrette which likewise blazed red above her black chignon, with her rolling gait rather like being afloat, she took her seat next to the Princess, serenely assured that from her midriff up she would be seen from all sides, like a resplendent floating marker.

Olivier slipped a remark to Tarsul, while establishing themselves behind the female pair:

“Lucierre may turn up; I sent word to him earlier today.”

The other man moved his head in a way that indicated disapproval. Here was a fresh example of Olivier, in his desperate push to get ahead in the world, having gone too quickly in Tarsul’s view. But what hope is there for those who wilfully ignore the shadings? Tarsul thought it useless to attempt again to explain to his protégé that he could only appropriately invite people of Lucierre’s station for déjeuner, or to his country estate, in the dissolved formality and broad-mindedness of open-air gatherings.

In pursuing the inspection Tarsul favoured regarding the auditorium’s makeup, he trained his lorgnette on Baron Saffre’s avant-scène. The Baron filled it with his spouse, his son, his daughter-in-law and the d’Exireuils. The Baroness, taking cover from the dazzle of lights, appeared merely as a figure drawn back into the penumbra of the rear box, against which the faint outline of her face was etched. Jacques d’Exireuil, positioned behind, constantly leaned in towards the Baron, evidently making polite efforts at short reflections, to which the listener answered solely with inattentive nods of his bull neck. An

onlooker as astute as Tarsul readily distinguished what was unduly eager in d'Exireuil's conduct, exceeding what was seemly between gentlemen of equal standing, and somewhat frantically subservient. He watched him ill at ease in his fidgety politeness of conversation, somehow semi-present in the dialogue, as indeed upon the velvet cushion. As to Giselle d'Exireuil, she looked straight before her, absently. An air of fatigue spoiled her delightful features. She possessed the aspect of one who could not sleep rather than one who was awake. A dusky hue encircled her big blue eyes. And in the midst of her white dress front, crimson roses seemed to bleed, producing the same mysterious symbol as the "wounded dove" upon the heaving of that nobly engorged chest. Tarsul scrutinised Giselle with all the corrupt keenness with which one rifles through a woman's looks to extract a secret one suspects she conceals. "It's done, or it's going to be done. That is the question!" he mused, without presuming to make more explicit deductions from his thoughts. Passing to Catherine Saffre, he observed her, she at least, in a state of surface tranquillity, projecting the hawkish pride of her visage, the sparkle of her teeth, the dusky majesty of a

forehead crowned with raven-blue locks, and her whole queenly beauty. Two times he watched her aim the same sideways look in the same direction, of which he could not say whether it was casual or furtive, while the concurrent dropping of her lid only heightened the aloofness of her impassive features. Yet, following this lead, Tarsul's opera glass was led to discover the Marquis de Renève standing towards the back in the Duchess de Laterrencoux's box.

Right then, the curtain closed upon the end of act two; and Tarsul breathed softly against the clamour of applauding hands:

"Well, well! they're putting the fresh fiancés on display tonight!…"

True to form, Roger d'Iancey could be seen carrying out the sanctioned role of a husband-to-be beside Mlle de Laterrencoux, who put forth a meagre display of her darkish, spindly arms, her little pinched face burning bright rose like a prude caught out.

After what looked like a moment spent appraising the young officer, Julienne Bréhand candidly revealed—

without raising a single eyebrow—the tangential thought she had actually arrived at most directly:

"I asked my sister de Grommelain to join us this evening, but she's come down with a touch of cold trying on three outfits back to back…"

Olivier turned to Tarsul:

"Ah! heading out?… I was hoping to have a word with you… No, no, don't let me keep you! We'll have all the time we need for a serious talk when you get back."

Tarsul was on his way to present his compliments, following a systematically ranked order, in a limited set of boxes where the mere fact of admission ensured his little standing would hold elsewhere. His first stop was the Gisors' box, counting solely on the protections afforded every approved caller from the moment they crossed that threshold where treating even suppliers politely was held as a supreme principle. Still, Tarsul had succeeded in putting himself front and centre, if only for an instant, with the Duke; and it was nothing more than credentials that, as it were, he had come seeking in this exalted place. Thus credentialed, he proceeded to the Marengos, where the young Princess instantly lavished attention on him,

keen to share about the Duchess de Gisors some flattering observation fit to be repeated when opportune. Since the Prince and Princess, by a fashionable rectitude of political bearing, were obliged to forgo associating with the Duke and Duchess, they were careful to employ remarkable intermediaries and obsequious envoys through whom to secure acknowledgement of their principality. To the Baroness Happarsheim's box, Tarsul came with the pompous pleasure of bearing in his right hand a handful of all the immeasurable distinction those consecutive highborn handshakes had just invested there. He carried like a nimbus the connections whereby he had known how to place himself sequentially on view, in the eyes of a society where each person's pride has at minimum the humbleness to relish gazing above themselves. At last, when it came time to go down to Baron Saffre's front box, Tarsul's prestige landed there with all the heft that the three first-rate boxes from which he had come bestowed from on high. The opinions he offered on the opera's music being presented were accordingly fixed as absolute in the judgement of Arthur Saffre, Saffre père, and Jacques d'Exireuil, whose approval merely wished to

attach itself to the mighty Baron's. The Baroness Saffre likewise offered that wordless, colourless assent in which, still, Tarsul could never find it possible to have faith. Solely Catherine and Giselle limited themselves to acknowledging him with trivial smiles beneath their vacant expressions: the first retreating into the innate scorn of her habitual daydreams; the second imprisoned in a Gethsemane of sombre reflections, their shadows spread by her long lashes over her face.

On returning to the Bréhands' box, Tarsul was taken aback, and not a little annoyed, to encounter young Vicomte de Lucierre, quite against his expectations. To be fair, he was there solely to beg off from remaining; but after all, he had made an appearance. But why?… It could not be Julienne's beauty, that much was clear!… Nor could it be Olivier's winning ways!… Tarsul needed only a moment's observation to rule out Princess Nagear as well; indeed, the amiable young Lucierre consistently appeared most pleased with his affair with Madame de Lizure, and the whole world seemed equally pleased about it… What, then? What was his purpose in being there? Of course! There could be but one solution: Luci-

erre's turning up was as good as announcing some tittle-tattle about his circumstances. It was rather like someone informing Tarsul: "You see little Lucierre, the one you imagined sitting pretty? Well! My good man, the chap's got money troubles. What sort? No matter; there's no need for you to hear the details." This unanticipated piece of news Tarsul would have been willing, thenceforth, to affirm on oath in the courts of men, as readily as before God's judgement seat. "And to prove it," he would have insisted, "note that on this given day, at this given hour, he went out of his way to attend the Opera, in the private box of the Bréhand couple."

While this was going on, Olivier had ushered Tarsul aside to the small drawing room in the back.

"My dear chap," he began, "I need you to be straight with me. Is it the right moment, do you think, yes or no, for me to put myself up for the Rallye-Club?"

Tarsul started visibly.

"I beg your pardon?… You're considering it already?… This early?… Good Lord! Why not try for the Steeple-Club whilst you're about it? Or perhaps one of those

establishments in the rue de la Concorde?... indeed, why not the Turf itself?..."

"You believe it's really so far beyond my reach, then?"

"Too early, old boy!... Far too early!... You can't possibly stand a chance for another year or two. And you'll have to do a devil of a lot of groundwork in the meantime!"

A bit thrown off, Olivier came back with:

"Still, I've already put myself out considerably. On your recommendation, I've joined the Cricket, the Horse and Dog, the Little-Bar... essentially, everything that's more accessible than the Rallye-Club, yet where you still mix with some of its members... And it's in those very places that not one, but ten people have advised me to present myself!..."

"You'll be walking straight into a wasps' nest!..."

"In what way?"

"Oh! Dear! That's not easy to put into words!... Tell you what, let me operate on this topic with a surgeon's ruthlessness. Pay attention, and don't make a fuss; it's in your best interests. You've pulled off a fine financial coup, and daily, isn't it so? you enjoy touching proof of it in

your portfolio, your wellbeing, your opulence—holding firmly the tangible evidence that you've achieved it. Most others, all those whom fortune has treated less kindly, take solace in ridiculing you, and in sensing they belong to a fellowship, cordially opposed to you, of those who haven't pulled off that coup or indeed wouldn't wish to have done. Still, this provides them with nothing but negative satisfaction, all told, of a wholly abstract kind. It can't become a genuine pleasure for them until the day when, by applying to them, you provide them with a tangible way to sense, for themselves, how unsullied their hands remain from not having done anything remotely similar to your actions. In this way they can exact payment for your successful venture, and extract their damages through withholding their approval of your membership.

Olivier had a sufficiently accommodating patience, traces of an old submissiveness to his department heads, enabling him to take whatever Tarsul now and then reproached him with rather spiritedly. However, owing to the self-assurance his gradually won social conquests had cultivated in him, maybe even on account of the fleeting

presence in his box, together with Princess Nagear, of a Viscount de Lucierre busy chatting to his wife, he dared this retort:

"Come now! The Rallye-Club—but you're part of it as well, no?"

This obviously implied that Tarsul had no more aristocratic 'de' than Bréhand; that neither man's origins could be properly traced, and that, in the absence of certainty about such things, wealth alone could make one count for something.

"Yes, I'm in," Tarsul replied with composure; "but if I put myself forward today, I'd doubtless be blackballed quicker than you, since I possess no merits to counterbalance my humble self. Though you're neglecting that I was there from the start!... That's about the only avenue people of my kind have for gaining entry to a choice establishment. They have to make the most of it during those permissive beginnings, when they've been clever enough to join the right founding set, where entry required no vote, merely twisting the doorknob to a top-drawer demimondaine's drawing room or some splen-

didly appointed private space in a prominent late-night dining establishment."

Confronted by these self-deprecating explanations, Olivier grew calmer. He picked up again, in a conciliatory spirit:

"You offered more encouragement when you took it upon yourself to get me Foncedrecq's yearlings. You told me at the time that three parts in four of my admission would thereby be won; most of all if I provided my seller with grounds to be thoroughly pleased with me… Did I skimp on anything? I've been jolly decent, I'd say. I made my father-in-law shell out most generously for it all… And now, following such sacrifices, you're saying I haven't advanced beyond square one!…"

"Not at all! Not at all! All that's marvellous! But you see, you're not through scattering seed, and you want to bring in the harvest!"

Olivier went on listing his credentials for the status of top-tier club member:

"My wife takes part in every worthy charity, or at least, she appears on all the good charitable rolls. Upon the merest hint, she throws herself into the work… She's

forever hobnobbing with Madame Admiral de Rie, with Mademoiselle de Sainte-Gudule…"

"Excellent! That's ideal! You were nobody, you had no standing. Now you have a presence in society, you're on the advancement roster of the upper crust… Actually, at the Rallye-Club, I've even heard people speak of you a little…

"Is that so?… And you didn't think to tell me?"

"The thing is, they were laying odds you'd never make it. The bulk of them thought your membership impossible. And that's equally superb! That represents a huge step forward. Twelve months ago, they wouldn't even have been able to speak your name, or then again, no one would have taken the trouble to oppose it."

"And riding to hounds, for which I'll also run myself ragged, isn't that a new advantage I can put forward? When you had me urge my father-in-law to purchase the Ozerpie domain, you assured me it was a master stroke to take over from the Marquis de Fé, as the hunt there had a smart set who would undoubtedly be keen to come back. I'm not fabricating a thing. It was you who pointed out to me, using the map, how the rights I'd possess could upset

the hunting arrangements between all the local landed gentry, block their access routes, should they not decide to receive me cordially… Therefore, the surest means the Nargenceys, Saint-Bels, and Malus have of securing my company this autumn is to back me at their club and vote in my favour this spring."

"You've no idea what they're like!" Tarsul answered, wagging his head. "You don't realise with what determination, with what selflessness even for a certain duration, they're capable of defending their clubs' domain. When you've observed them only once forbidding access, wielding ballot balls like shrapnel, you're persuaded this is their highest stronghold!"

"No, hear me, Tarsul, frankly, you're excessively discouraging, excessively pessimistic!"

The man pointed first to one end, then the other of his opera glasses.

"You," he said, "are the one who's distressingly optimistic!… You stubbornly regard your aim through the little sides that advance you towards it, whilst ignoring the big sides that serve to push you away… Primo, you're ill-served at the Rallye-Club by Grommelain, whose word is

deemed credible, being your brother-in-law. Secundo, you run up against the hostility of those whose forefathers once possessed everything, and who understand how much more affluent they'd be if Baron Saffre had remained less so. And apropos of this, when the time comes to engage your patrons, it would help if they swore blind that you yourself hold your father-in-law in contemptible regard and that you don't scruple, in select company, to denounce him as a fraud. That may well dispose a certain quantity of minds to support you… But the party you provoke to the most relentless hostility comprises those members whose place in the club is least defensible, who slipped in only through the basest intrigues, regrettable favouritism, by ambush, so to speak. All such members' efforts are bent on keeping the club hereafter closed, shut tight, padlocked behind them, since they've made it! They cannot bring themselves to admit someone who finds himself in precisely their circumstances, whose fresh acceptance would seem to debase the distinction they won with such pains. They only ever want to leave the door ajar for some character who'd be an authentic great lord, equipped to boost yet

further the status of their comradeships… Additionally, you haven't thus far carried out a vital formality. From day one, I alerted you that you'd need to obtain a title, or at minimum change your surname… How come you've put yourself behind schedule on this issue?"

"I confess, I hadn't the pluck… I feared the absurdity of it somewhat…"

"Nonsense! Why, everyone today courageously goes about adjusting their name, to whatever degree it's needed. It's a stint of tedium to suffer through, which occasions hardly more hilarity than witnessing the trivial hardships of regimental service, since most people have done it or predict they'll have to do it also, inescapably."

"And besides, I was afraid of losing the favour of the nobility, the… real nobles, those born to it. Do they willingly tolerate such intrusion upon their rights?

"My dear man, they're fairly outraged, to be sure. Yet in the end, they come to accept it as homage—an unpretentious effort by a man of inferior birth to elevate himself slightly in their direction and become, in his own person, a connection they needn't be ashamed to mention. Ere long, they grow quite well-disposed towards the

fellow who has courteously supplied them with jests by adopting a sobriquet in deference to society's ways. In due course, simple idleness makes them neglect to inject ridicule when they speak of or summon their fresh bourgeois-turned-gentleman using his fabricated name, which consequently becomes validated by their own tongues."

"Fine, I'll handle what must be done on that front… But it'll have to wait till next year!… I honestly can't tackle everything in one go!" declared Olivier with fatigued despondency.

There was perceptible in his protest the exhausting grind of working in social climbing. Having spent years luxuriating in suddenly being utterly free of obligations, the hungers of elite society had caught him unawares and roused him from his leisure. He stopped as though needing to regain his wind; he needed to recuperate briefly following these months during which he had been compelled to remake himself as stockbreeder and chief huntsman, equestrian, sportsman, and all but a genuine gentleman.

Tarsul carried on remorselessly:

"Very well! But you err in putting it off. You've stayed far too lengthy a time using your birth name. You've already allowed yourself to be introduced with it to far too wide a circle!… What's beyond doubt, in any event, is that M. Bréhand will never gain entry to the Rallye-Club. Bréhand evokes only this, whether spoken or remembered: the small-time opportunist who wed the Baron Saffre's girl. With luck, the Holy Father's grace might conceivably turn you into Count Bréhand, which would be something of an enhancement. Yet the wisest move, in sum, would be to erase every echo that recalls your history. Take up a name, as elaborate or simple as you like, but nothing flashy—something unprecedented that can insinuate itself smoothly and treads on no one's toes. Affix it to your calling cards and let it gain currency. At that point, these two or three syllables that haven't yet made the rounds anywhere… four even, if you wish… will denote the fellow whose most noteworthy quality people remember will be having shared dinner with him at the Elioboths', to begin with, or at the Seygre-Ronnes'. You'll likewise be that recent arrival whom, by the coming summer, the Cheurbes, Nargenceys, Malus, and Saint-Bels

will have begun rubbing shoulders with during the type of season when society loosens up rather. Eventually, you'll be the person who's properly minded about everything, hosts more splendidly still, and regarding whom nothing need be known save that he goes by Monsieur… Monsieur However-you-like!"

Just then, the diminutive Viscount de Lucierre, bidding farewell to the two women in the box and saluting as he backed away, introduced the black outline of his evening jacket into Tarsul's sphere of observation.

"Listen," he went on, muting his tone, "I'm concerned you're equally wanting in that utterly uncomplicated liberality through which the well-off can secure many friends and an extremely valuable coterie in fashionable society. I gather you're fairly resistant to loosening the purse?

"Nothing of the sort!" declared Olivier… You yourself would be staggered by how much money I've lent out if I produced the small ledger where I keep track of loans people have taken from me…

“But that’s the whole issue—one mustn’t keep a little ledger!… People expect the sublime disregard for amounts you’ve lent!…”

Lucierre, in departing, clasped hands with the two men and warned them, smiling amiably, that the third act was already substantially in progress. Olivier, stunned by all that had just been said, offered the young viscount perfunctory thanks. The geniality of their leave-taking possessed something barren, something inexpressibly wanting, which Tarsul detected after Olivier had shown his visitor out.

“Shall I tell you what I think?” he asked… You’re no doubt the sort who could be persuaded, if absolutely necessary, to lend a bob or two, as the saying goes. However, I don’t sense you possess the delicate touch needed to assist those whose financial straits cause them deep shame. And make no mistake—being penniless has its own tender spots of self-respect, every bit as much as true indigence… Ah, what doors would open with a bit of considerate delicacy, in a milieu where numerous folk are plagued by wants whilst having to keep up appearances! I could list a dozen of these high-born souls, incapable of

requesting help, unbendingly proud, dedicating every waking hour to resenting your means, yet slip them a hundred louis tactfully and they'd speak nothing but good of you for an entire day! Go on then, old chap, show some largesse! Allow your wealth to roll about somewhat, so there's always a bit lying round for the taking… Would you like me to share another trick? Get yourself known as a big player… Indeed, indeed, become known for dealing with unlimited stakes at clubs where membership will follow naturally: at the Gelinottes, the New-Street, the Merrymakers. I know chaps who were virtually seized at the gaming tables where they were the star attraction, only to be forthwith welcomed into the Rallye-Club, purely so their jinx—which had been flooding from their pockets at unworthy places—might be harvested there instead.

During the tail end of this consultation, Princess Nagear had swivelled round towards the talkers more than once, looking rather put out, no doubt annoyed at being stranded with Madame Bréhand.

"They need us back!" Olivier pointed out, going forward.

“Here’s a thought,” Tarsul hissed on playful inspiration, “the Princess is somebody you’d be wise to gently draw to your cause. Given her embassy connections, her appeal, her network and her worldly wisdom, she has the power to open valuable doors and cleverly smooth your way in numerous salons.”

Beside his wife’s nearly featureless bulk, Olivier Bréhand watched the Princess, a willowy and unutterably enticing form, with the nakedness of her falling shoulders, and at the back of her dress, that tailored angle revealing white flesh that plunged to an audaciously low point, sharp as provocation.

“I think the Princess is a wonderful friend of ours!” Olivier remarked disingenuously, masking the unsettling impact of the thoughts Tarsul’s hint had steered him towards.

The latter, seated at present behind Madame Bréhand, was trying to fathom what curious sentiment had made him draw Olivier’s attention to the beautiful foreign woman. Searching his conscience, he could make out an instinctual bond with a fellow creature of his type. She too was a lonely being, wrestling with life’s entangle-

ments just as he did, with her own discreetly buried compromises and a polished veneer for her dealings. For an instant, he fancied that he must have bowed to a compassionate urge. He wanted to whisper in the princess's ear: "You know, that scheme of ours from a moment ago? Well! I've already put it into action: I've just been playing uncle for you!..." Yet as Tarsul's fancy was indulging in what he took to be the innocent delights of doing good, he glimpsed something tremendously telling in a shift from the portly Julienne that exposed her profile. She was watching Olivier's demeanour with the ruthless gaze of a proprietor. The young man, in a reckless second, his knees pressed against the princess's backrest, was murmuring some small pleasantry, his lips brought rather close to her ear. Olivier felt transfixed by his wife's look; he stopped talking and leaned backwards, all his wit completely flattened. The soft reddish fluff on the princess's neck halted its merry flutter, starved of another puff of conversation... It then occurred to Tarsul that there was another motive—purely wicked, this—that he might have unknowingly entertained too when unleashing this young

spouse, so strictly reined in but so hot-headed, upon the treacherous scent of Princess Nagear.

IV

Giselle d'Exireuil

She was aquiver with rage and fright, listening intently at the smoking-room door, behind which her husband was speaking with the man who had barged in with such effrontery… What had just entered to unleash itself was a lender's wrath, a storm of financial demands. And the way Jacques d'Exireuil responded went beyond that of a simple defaulter; his floundering words, whilst promising prompt payment, betrayed all the unsteadiness of a poor soul without the knack for deception, though sadly not without the wish for it.

Thus was Giselle abruptly thrust into the terrible reality of their predicament; and this first clear view took her right to the heart of it. Until now, she had believed they were experiencing only fleeting difficulties in handling

their fortune, not suspecting her husband had thoroughly compromised everything. A while back, she had even been somewhat charmed by the opportunity to prove sensible when Jacques reduced their way of living, blaming it on decreased returnsfrom their estates. She had shied away from any blow-by-blow accounts, behaving like an overgrown child who would rather be caressed than instructed, unwilling to have her brain addled with income reports or bond conversion sagas… In time, she had indeed remarked that Jacques's predicament continued, seemingly growing worse, if his snippy comments, his absorbed expressions, and a type of jittery unease were anything to go by. But she had obeyed the loving instinct not to inflame with urgent questioning the troubled state in which she often found him. She had minded only to comfort him with kindness, to further his aims, to oppose him in no way whilst navigating these troubled waters. For to Giselle, like most ladies of her class, the workings of money appeared to operate, beyond mortal influence, according to a system comparable to that which brings about the seasonal changes. The whole of their intellect and their most earnest zeal are applied

only to weathering present troubles with grace or courage, whilst awaiting the fated return of some illusory springtime to make their position shine again.

And lo, in an instant, she was given proof that her home was at bay!... What explained Jacques, normally so short-fused, so prickly about his reputation, letting himself be so disgracefully badgered at home by this creature, doubtless some loan shark, who demanded on-the-spot repayment of twenty-seven thousand francs?...

“No, no! Stop fobbing me off!” yelled a savage voice; “I’ve been strung along too long for my money!...”

And Jacques answered imploring delays, in an altogether different voice, barely audible, a pitiable sweet voice whose anguish through the wall broke the heart in Giselle’s big eyes, forever quick to fill with tears.

“Why delay in cashing in everything?” resumed the lender, “Have I got horses to my name? Start off by selling yours!...”

The cruelty of this demand made Giselle flinch. What is more, it was terribly unfair: the team of horses had already been given up. Brigg had been willing to reclaim them; and if Jacques and Giselle sometimes still took

them out, they were merely renting them, until a buyer came along and the fond remembrance of those faithful creatures was well and truly ended.

"I'm past caring," the voice pressed on with menace; "refuse to satisfy my claim and with this court ruling, I'll have you seised upon!"

Seised!… All the furnishings… every jewel… the entire wardrobe… How could this be legal? That someone should appear and rip away, thing after thing, all those possessions grown as natural as one's own flesh, which through their perfect adaptation to one's ways, their amiable surrender to habit, seemed destined to remain forever!… And yet—what of Manif the draper who had renewed the little salon's fabric and whose account still stood open?… and what of Noëla, with her sewing account still pending?… not forgetting the saddler? the sweet-shop owner?… oh Lord! the baker as well, surely?… Rather a throng it would amount to, at the picking of bones, the division of prey.

Giselle overheard her husband's low reply:

“Show a little more patience, I beg… I may escape this embarrassment forthwith, by means of a significant deal I have underway.”

This utterance felt to the young woman like a cruel tweak at her heartstrings. Ah! quite the magnificent affair, truly—with that excellent friend Saffre, of course? —this deal Jacques was crowing about!… Wretched soul! He remained blind then, would not deign to suspect, given that she had lacked the courage to distress him more by speaking out, amid all the other anxieties for which she had formerly held him—and how rightfully—responsible!… Yes indeed, the promise of this enterprise must be quite wonderful, given that the other afternoon, in the great reception room next door, as the servants dawdled interminably with the lamps and Baron Saffre was their sole caller, she had found herself breaking the service bell in mingled rage and panic.

“Some deal!” the creditor burst out… “Forever these deals!… Do you think I have time to wait for yours to bear fruit?… I too have pressing matters that won’t be put off! … I shan’t allow you any time unless I see something more substantial, more concrete ahead…”

Thus harrying Jacques d'Exireuil, putting his mind to the rack, the creditor sought to force from the failing debtor some revelation of means, some pledge against a deadline, inflicting the most harrowing exercises of creative thinking.

Through her husband's stammered postponements and acknowledgements of ruin, Giselle was astounded to catch him abruptly fabricating the possibility of enlisting some aunt's help… Aunts they had none, either of them, no more than any other kin. For a long while now, the pair had bit by bit become, as it were, isolated in existence. And seldom had they even observed the fact, so fulfilled were they in their mutual company… So Giselle perceived at that instant, more clearly even than before, through the wild desperation and baseness of this lie, the void into which her husband plunged them both. She could not endure another moment of the wretched man claiming what he might rightfully hope for—ostensibly at a moment's notice—from this non-existent aunt, "her ladyship your aunt", in the creditor's newly softened and gulled tones.

Embarrassment, more powerful than dread, compelled her to leave the pathetic post where she had been playing spy. She collapsed into a chair, mind blank, body crumpled, arms nerveless and spread along the supports of her seat.

When Jacques came in, rattled by the confrontation he had weathered and trying to piece together a brave face, his wife's expression informed him that all pretending could cease. He perceived immediately that the blow had found her, through a wall too meagre to offer refuge.

He welcomed this: the chance to relieve himself through brutal honesty, rather than be forced to contain his feelings. He erupted, thrusting his fingers frantically into the rough black pelt of his military cut:

"It makes you want to smash your head against the wall!... This one today! Someone else tomorrow!... I'm finished... I must find a way out, whatever it takes!"

Giselle regained control of herself. She hurried to her husband's side, caught his clenched hands gripped in distress, and gently uncurled them to intertwine with hers. Nestling into him, in that embrace where each hides their face from the other, for the heartache is too unbearable to

display or behold, she placed beneath his mouth her blonde neck arched in submission.

"My precious love!" she cried... "My Jacques!... Oh! how could you have done this?..."

Such was her only rebuke. Almost immediately she sensed her husband's tears streaming down her skin, along with his broken sighs.

"My poor love!" he stuttered, "I'm desperately miserable over the pain I've brought you!... Ah! you must realise, I was too spineless initially at the thought of forcing privations upon you the instant they were called for... When those strikes in Belgium reduced our earnings by half, I should have put the brakes on our lifestyle at once... I was equally spineless about sacrificing our reputation in the eyes of society... And after all, how can one be reasonable when in love? No, one lacks the courage to limit one's way of life when it's so sweet for two to inhabit it together, nor to tear down a collection of things wherein one's happiness has made itself so perfectly at home with all its little arrangements!..."

“Why did you keep me in the dark?... Could you not count on my love to stay contented even in taking the most drastic measures?”

“I wished to shield you from any distress, to spare you the worry you might have suffered from an extreme modification of our relatively luxurious habits... My plan, in the beginning, was to handle it all until our funds were replenished, so that you’d never guess they had been depleted for a while. That’s how I came to pursue risky investments with large returns, which turned out catastrophically!... But am I to blame that our lives were mingled, caught up, tied to those of people surrounding us who were so frightfully rich!... The hole in our finances kept widening. Every day there were new gaps I needed to fill. I played cards at the club; I gambled on the Exchange... All went awry for us!... And maybe the most horrifying thing... yes, the worst above all, was feeling all the while the secret of what was happening growing between us whilst I was unable to destroy your peace of mind, your dear trust with a horrible confession!...”

With shy hesitation, yet in a voice where the last shreds of hope still flickered through her faltering words, Giselle asked:

"Then this is well and truly the end?... Is there really nothing left to us?"

Jacques said nothing.

"Oh! My Lord!" she exclaimed, burying her face in her hands... "My Lord! My Lord!..."

Their calamity was slow to penetrate completely into minds that could initially comprehend it only in fragments... This collapse towards which she had recently had the confused sensation of advancing, of sinking, then the stunning realisation of plunging headlong—now touching the abyss, she was prepared to admit all things except that she was hopelessly trapped here.

"What... what happens next?" she wailed miserably.

She assumed that immobile pose of pleading and weakness characteristic of women who, amidst disaster, still look to men for salvation and place faith only in those who have led them to this storm's heart.

This cry stirred Jacques from his defeated state.

“Do take heart, my darling girl!… Yes, our circumstances are desperately serious. But I’ve every confidence something will shortly save us… We might find our way out this very day.”

She gazed at him with worry, but also with desperate longing for reasons to be hopeful.

He checked the mantel clock, ensuring he had time to provide his wife with explanations before being obliged to leave, and began, completely engrossed in his subject and almost entirely heartened by it:

“That plan which has you scowling each time I’ve tried to broach it?… Yes! Precisely that! And for the love of heaven, don’t cut me off straight away! We’ve no time left for immature games… Hear me out properly, and you’ll admit it’s a superb idea. And we’re just a hair’s breadth from making it happen and having it in my grasp… Which means fresh wealth for us in a matter of years… And at once, postponements, financing, loans to cope with our most critical needs!… And furthermore, a whole tide of brilliant transactions on all sides, within a network of high-level financial associates where one deals only in guaranteed successes… You’ll grasp it at once: Archduke

Gaétan is furnishing the deal. You understand he's hardly a common sort? He's substantially eaten into his fortune back home with his craze for building palaces; and since he's merely twenty-five, they're having him travel to calm his spirits. This is how he struck up a close friendship with the Sultan of Mindanao; and the latter was only too happy to bestow upon him the concession for the island's sumac groves… The term doesn't ring any bells for you, does it? You haven't a notion what sumacs are? Well now, they're a sort of tree that everyone's acquainted with under their ordinary name of Japan varnish trees. From this tree one draws, by making cuts, the material from which lacquer is produced… Well? You immediately see what sort of business worth lies in this? And this resin is increasingly sought after since the Chinese and Japanese have supposedly exhausted and destroyed their native lacquer trees. At any rate, the Archduke swears it's so; and he should be informed, since he's freshly back from those territories… Hence, with the treaty he's procured, we can start harvesting immense sumac forests from tomorrow—pristine forests blanketing entire island

provinces, which the Sultan cedes on splendid terms, as a friend, with true Eastern magnanimity…"

Gradually working himself into a fever pitch, Jacques expounded on all the lacquer's uses, rapidly dreaming up purposes no one had yet imagined for it. Carried away by his fervent hopes, he imagined the industry of this wondrous lacquer taking on limitless expansion, progressively coating the infinite variety of society's objects, hardening throughout the four quarters of a lacquered universe.

"As it stands," he resumed, "we've put together a group for this enterprise, very nicely arranged, though at present it's merely the Archduke's Parisian companions—the ones who play with him at the club whenever he passes through… Among our number are Epernon, Meuil, Chalacet, the Marquis de Fé…"

He listed yet more names—some famously ruined, the rest hounded by charges eating away at their fortunes, all of them cornered into undertaking business schemes. In this aristocratic company, whose ancestors had held dominion over the land, the most hard-pressed were indeed casting their sights anew upon that ancient source

of sustenance. Having lost their lands in their native country, they nevertheless preserved the simple belief that they ought to establish themselves on land, with an inborn reluctance to fathom more elaborate means of enrichment. By instinct, they sought to gain control of territories around the globe whose owners might prove null, uncertain, or tractable. They fantasised about lands whose wealth would be ready-made and flourishing, where man would appear to them once more in blessed ignorance, untouched by the putrefaction of thought, like the trusty beast of agriculture found again, still yoking himself to provide for his masters. And the possibility of reclaiming lordship for themselves—even an Asian one—set these gentlemen ablaze, sick of the unfruitful Parisian soil and the parched exhaustion of their estates, laying open to their dreams colonial illusions and recreating feudal hopes.

"It's very probable indeed," he insisted further, "that in deference to the Archduke and the worldly figures presently united around him, we'd secure aid from the Elioboths, or the Happarsheim concern… However, there's only one man with enough drive to put this enter-

prise on solid ground, assemble the initial funds, set it up, and back it immediately… And that's Saffre!"

From the opening of this whole account, Giselle had felt that name looming, rumbling throughout the subject. Once more this man's power, and constantly his threat hovering over her! The very man who had been hounding her without respite these three months, abusing the fact that propriety restrained her, for her husband's sake, from making a scandal! Had he not ventured, merely the previous day at the Bois-Revins', to refer jovially to that recent scene where Giselle had experienced such intense dread of him under her own roof!

And as if the phantom of that shameless personage had thenceforth established itself as an unwelcome third in their exchange, Giselle temporarily ceased, without being conscious of it, to speak informally to her husband.

"No, no," she protested, "don't deliver yourself into Saffre's hands! You know full well his reputation in business for systematically devouring all his partners one by one?…"

"Nothing but idle talk, my love! Must one believe every bit of spite? Anyway, I've no other option. Saffre

excels at these bold financial gambits; and he alone is shrewd enough to supply the venture at once with the two or three million needed to start on a large scale. Moreover, he's essentially the sole connection I have in the world of high finance. I'm even blessed that we have a real intimacy between us, and he shows himself extremely well-disposed towards me, very considerate at all times… In any event, I'm no longer uncommitted as far as he's concerned, having already brought up the matter with him more than once. Were I foolish enough to seek another's support instead of his, he would at once transform into a merciless foe. That's how he operates: one is either on his side or his enemy, nothing in between!"

The longer Jacques spoke, the more the baron's face seemed to Giselle to embody a growing sense of tyranny and inexorable doom.

Again, Jacques looked to see what time it was.

"The moment is approaching," he said, "when I'll know where I stand with him. I'm to see Saffre this afternoon at his premises on the rue de Châteaudun… Indeed, I'd better start making my way there…"

His wife got to her feet, all aquiver, bracing herself for the harsh necessity of opening her husband's eyes to Saffre's intrigues against her, overwhelmed by the disaster she was about to unleash in bringing down their last resort.

Jacques, ever mindful of punctuality, had taken out his pocket watch to verify it against the mantelpiece clock. He was oblivious to the fact that his wife had positioned herself to block his exit, in a singularly dramatic and impassioned gesture. Still looking down, he added:

"I can't bear to remain in suspense much longer. For if I've fooled myself with this proposition, I'll need to make up my mind about something else at once…"

"What else is there?" asked Giselle eagerly, distracted from what she was on the point of saying.

"Oh! It's a short list!… There's joining Hoirlond and Néceras down in Australia, where according to someone at the club just lately, they're getting on quite nicely with the ranching. They likewise left with empty pockets, on a boat packed with emigrants!… Or else I could possibly attach myself to Bopraing, who's going to the Mozambique coast for the gold mining syndicate."

"Oh! Yes, yes!" Giselle cried out, "that's what we should do! Why shouldn't we choose one of those options over any other?... Do it, I tell you, rather than remain here, drawing the pity of everyone we know, condemned to a pitiable life of struggle and ruin, let's get away, come with me, let's depart!..."

"What do you mean? You think I'd be able to bring you along?... My sweet child, you've taken leave of your wits!... Do you not understand what life is like in those places?... Bedding down on bare earth... Marching through malarial swamps... The blazing sun, the downpours, the fever, poisonous beasts, all of it combined, not to mention the threat of thirst and starvation.

Giselle's gaze had turned desperate.

"Your only course," he pressed on, "if I'm reduced to going, would be for us to unearth, from our most obscure relations, some cousin in the provinces who'd agree to take you in, to provide for you, while I'm gone... a year or two. God knows? It might be three years!..."

She fell upon her husband's chest in a flood of tears.

"No! Don't you dare leave me behind!... I won't allow you to go. I must be part of whatever befalls you. Let me

share your suffering wherever you may be, to grasp you close, to know you're there, remaining forever by your side and keeping you forever mine…"

"That's sheer folly!" he said, softly pressing his hand against her lips in an attempt to quiet her… Not only am I determined to shield you from the dangers of such exploits; but I'd never be considered credible anywhere, never given even the smallest assignment, if they learnt I had brought along—heaven help me!—the encumbrance of a wife… Moreover, if hardship grew truly insufferable with the passing months, in such an infernal place…"

The words emerged from Jacques in deeply sombre tones, his features clouded with tragic darkness.

"Please!" she exclaimed with a shrill cry, "what other horrors are you about to reveal?…"

"Well, what would you have me do!… Mustn't we, in our present situation, face all the alternatives that lie ahead?… I should prepare for what I'd feel if, worn down by hardship, I at last perceived the uselessness of my suffering!… Can't you understand that my anguish would require the comfort of finding myself wholly unaccompanied there, with no one depending on my return, and

able, when the punishment for my wrongs had grown unbearably excessive, to choose my own finale?…

Giselle, choked with horror, stared at him so present and animated; yet beneath a pall of loss, she could see nothing but his distant corpse.

Now, aghast at having let such words escape, Jacques was showering his wife with affection, asking her to forgive him again and again.

"God! I'm sorry, precious love!" he implored… You realise how witless I was to stray into such ridiculous speculations! Find your sweet bravery once more, dare to hope and have faith! Our salvation is at hand. I'll put all to rights, no force will split us asunder…"

She stood there drained and mute. Jacques petted her softly, practically willing her to smile so as to secure, right away, this tiny indication of hope, as though it were a protective spell.

"Trust me through to evening, and I'll return with happy tidings… Forget about my going abroad! Let Archduke Gaétan himself endure, for our sake, the vile sea-crossings, the arduous travels… All I ask is that you've overcome your reservations about my overture to Baron

Saffre. Your trust and endorsement shall be my talisman… Say that I'm doing well, that my judgement is true, that success will be mine… Vow it upon your life!

At this, Giselle, with spasming features awash in weeping, breathed forth but one word, faintly discernible, from behind the soaked little handkerchief she crushed unconsciously against her mouth:

"Yes!" came her whispered breath.

Jacques, urged on by the scheduled hour of his meeting, took leave of his wife while she still could not bring herself to stir.

The anguished creature was left shattered in will, every ounce of strength drained from her body. Try as she might, she could not drive away the devastating pictures of her Jacques wandering lost across the globe, snatched into the unknown by tempests, utterly alone, reduced to skin and bone, never to be by her side again in this existence, having turned to death as a less ghastly alternative, yet with no guarantee it would bring them together again… Slowly, an idea began to surface amongst these intolerable imaginings: she found it unthinkable that her husband might fail in his bid for deliverance, which she

could no longer deny was, in truth, their sole option. And with greater intensity than before, there impressed itself upon her the might of this subduer of creatures and fate, who emerged again as the sole person equipped to dispel the ghastly nightmares that beleaguered all her wifely affection.

Such were Giselle d'Exireuil's thoughts when, through the most startling turn of events, the manservant proclaimed the presence of the selfsame figure who filled the reveries in which she was lost.

"Baron Saffre!" she echoed in amazement... "Baron Saffre!"

However, to prevent the manservant standing formally for orders from seeing more of her agitation:

"Have him come in!..." she commanded, with such instinctive haste that it was sheer chance that kept her from denying him; yet chance understands, for its own purposes, in what direction it must fatefully act when a soul's failing gives it leave to decide on their behalf.

As he presented himself, Baron Saffre, despite being completely ignorant of what had just transpired, sensed at first glance that he had appeared at exactly the proper

instant. He noticed Giselle's undone expression, her inflamed eyes, the powerful tremor of distress throbbing in her throat beneath the satin of a lacy negligée. And with his expansive predator's nostrils, he drew in the inner turbulence that charged the small parlour he had been ushered into.

"How do you come to be here," she asked, "at precisely the time you appointed for my husband to call on you?"

Baron Saffre rejoined, with all the emphases of exquisite propriety:

"I've arranged for M. d'Exireuil to be invited to do me the courtesy of waiting for my return."

With sovereign assurance—and leaving no room for criticism—the baron drew a line between himself and the previous day's friend who, in turning supplicant, had relinquished his status as a peer. Giselle found herself injured in her husband's pride, lowered and enfeebled by the effrontery of this manoeuvre, wherein Saffre deployed Jacques d'Exireuil to attest to his lordly caprice.

"It matters greatly to me," the baron said, "to redress the impression of disapproval I could tell you still held concerning me. You awaken such profound fondness and

admiration in me that I cannot accept being forever ill-thought-of by you…"

Very much at a loss, Madame d'Exireuil had taken refuge with her back to the light on a corner settee that, nestled between window and wall, created a sort of hide-away in an embrasure dimmed by a hanging. Saffre, on a chair drawn close, had settled himself before her. He examined intently the corner's depths where such exquisite feminine lines, touched by the delicately shaded draperies, were bathed in aquamarine gleams, as the young woman's face, with the blonde radiance of her skin, seemed to emerge from underwater shadows like a timid sea-sprite materialising.

"I beg of you," he resumed, "don't be mistaken about me, and convince yourself that in me you have your most faithful friend. I provide you demonstration of this even as we speak, since if I've come, it's first and foremost to hear your wishes…"

"I fail to follow you…" whispered Giselle.

"It's very simple: M. d'Exireuil has substantial ventures in mind in which he wants me to take part. I wished to hear directly from you that these notions caused you

no concern? The world of business is so perilous for the inexperienced that I would refuse to smooth your husband's path unless this undertaking met with your absolute favour."

Giselle, after several moments of uncertainty, chose not to state her position:

"Oh! I haven't the slightest understanding of these subjects… I couldn't possibly have a view on them…"

"But then, if your husband had made up his mind to venture into trade for substantial reasons, you would surely be aware of them… I'm prepared to talk him out of ill-considered notions; but equally to back him, if you thought it… essential… or in any way useful…"

He had delivered those closing phrases with feigned indifference, anxious not to reveal his keen desire to know just how badly off the household really was. His was the blasé, gluttonous spirit of an ogre past his prime, yet he was ready to exercise patience if the morsel he coveted had not been sufficiently tenderised by misfortune. He was feeling her out with queries, trying to establish whether circumstances had kept her in suspense long enough to ripen to the proper point of rot.

The young woman made another attempt at deflection:

"The only thing I'm aware of is that Jacques has been gripped of late by an actual desire for enterprise, the likes of which I'd never observed in him... And surely he could do no better than to ask your advice... to rely on your competence..."

Through her obvious facade of indifference showed only a miserable, hunted creature trying to make herself small. Saffre sought to determine whether this pitiful subterfuge might hide something deeper, supposing—unlikely as it seemed—that husband and wife were in league to take advantage of him. His code of conduct, his much-vaunted expertise, depended on the art of mistrusting all people in all matters and forever presuming the worst possible scenario. By this approach, any unexpected discoveries could only provide him with outcomes that reflected well on mankind.

Thrilled by the mistrust he had just conceived, and spurred to that game of cunning at which he excelled, Baron Saffre worked the animated features of his impos-

ing head, took a great lungful of air with his lion-like bearing, as though finally able to breathe with pleasure:

"I'm decidedly glad to hear you say that," he remarked… There's a weight off my heart, now that you've taken the trouble to convey that no dire need is spurring your husband on… One readily grows concerned about those one holds dear… And I must admit, I'd stopped being completely at peace, such is my profound sympathy for your situation… I can now perceive M. d'Exireuil's case perfectly: a man about town momentarily sick of his idleness, or possibly vexed that his wealth sits so inertly… Right, let me seize this moment to be perfectly candid myself. Your husband mustn't be permitted to follow these pipe dreams a moment longer. I've seen this sort of thing before in men of his background. Such ventures are unfailingly perilous, and commonly lead to ruin!"

"Still, it's my husband's place to inform you of his actual intentions, to lay out his grounds… I'm not sufficiently versed in the matter to depict them truthfully. I wasn't trying to suggest… I haven't implied anything…"

She mumbled incoherently, shocked by the ease with which Saffre was already sidestepping what the luckless Jacques was banking on, in a predicament whose outcome could be ruinous. Yet the Baron, intent on thoroughly disconcerting her, had already launched into a breakneck tirade:

"The fact is, most affairs undertaken by society folk—my conviction is fixed on this point, absolutely established… Re-established, one might say, he added, laughing, since I've occasionally been caught out myself, through sheer kindheartedness."

And this fit of gaiety crashed discordantly, eerily misplaced, through the small reception room where the air of crisis had been growing heavier by the minute.

All colour drained from her face, Giselle said:

"Jacques isn't one to make frivolous proposals. And you could count on his uprightness every bit as much as his commitment…"

"Quite so! my dear… Still, it's forever under equally reputable banners that well-mannered gentlemen of breeding put forward their undertakings, which nonetheless end up leaving only the most pitiful souvenirs…

Think back to the Cape-Norman enterprise, the Universal Fusion concern, the New Indies Canal project, naming only the companies that achieved fame through failure. Countless smaller ventures merely limped along till they were utterly spent, disappearing no less wretchedly, but without a sound… A great number of these concerns I'm remembering had at their helm these terrible worldly gentlemen, well-born sons schooled in sophisticated, moneyed circles, or a supremely select group of titled fathers. Encircling them, amongst their advisers, there flocked characters of the highest distinction… And the whole lot of it, just to go predictably, unswervingly, inevitably to receivership, assuming it wasn't outright bankruptcy and court action!…

Giselle felt the likelihood of salvation, for both her and her husband, evaporating dismally under this scornful reasoning. Saffre's contaminating speech, falling heavily, seemed to weigh down like muddy soles upon the befouled bread of their hopes.

"You may be convinced," he pressed on, "that these men of the world carry a defect inseparable from their breeding. The weakness of almost every one of them is

knowing how to do virtually nothing on their own. All they know is how to give commands, to bark instructions. Well, in business dealings, these same terms, though continuing to describe a manner of proceeding, gain an altogether special meaning. To command, to hand down orders, means thereafter assuming charge of countless things, burdening oneself with endless responsibilities… And how could you possibly think these fine fellows might muddle through all that alone? A valet has always been there to arrange their clothes, their shirts and their patent shoes; parents laid out wealth for them. And it fell to the solicitor and the stock agent to prepare, from one day to the next, their dues and their returns. And during their squandering of their birthright, a maiden was being groomed for them, preparing to feed them dinner from her marriage portion when, near their thirties, they'd consumed their lunch of personal fortune… Yes, but eventually, the time and need for supper might arrive; and by that stage, there's nobody to furnish it… not so charitably, at any rate! Look here, the character of these sorts used to the luxuries of upper-class life doesn't alter when they take up residence in their office, above all well-

appointed, where they supposedly handle so much business. The moment they feel so lonely, their first priority is having twenty-five call buttons put in, as though to call up electrically the devil and his entourage to wait on them… So tell me, who do you think infallibly shows up as they press away at those buttons?… Ah! not the solicitor, not the securities dealer, and soon not even the lackeys themselves! It's a whole other breed of busybody who spring into action: the shady dealer, arriving to rid them of their entitlements; the chantage artist, who takes away their mettle; the bailiff, quick to grab hold of even their garments and underclothes; and at last, occasionally, the police commissioner, who proceeds in turn to divest them of whatever scrap of honour might yet be in reserve…"

He interrupted himself as Giselle had stood and, struggling for air, cried out:

"Say you're entertaining yourself by causing me pain? … that this is all untrue?… that my husband's proposition isn't irrevocably doomed in your opinion, without so much as a hearing?"

Rising too, Saffre found himself slightly troubled by his own heartlessness, though he was now absolutely certain that before him stood only a being of pure sincerity, a study in charm and sorrow. But what had made her show this last bit of fortitude? What prompted this sudden movement that had her standing yet again, opposite him, in what seemed a last vestige of bravado?

"Why certainly!" he declared disingenuously, "certainly, I'm afraid! All attempts of this kind are worth the same. Invariably some delusion of inflamed minds, that turn into splattered brains!..."

These ruthless words, the revival of this brutal vision, this unendurable abomination though so very possible, so continually thrust upon them, forced a cry from Gisèle:

"We're doomed!" she lamented as she collapsed into her chair, leaning her head back, concealing her great tearless eyes, her features withered by fever.

"What's all this?... Oh! my sweet child!" Saffre protested as he sat back down beside her... "How could you possibly be doomed with me here, willing to shield you from everyone and everything?"

Having taken hold of her hands, he strove to lift the cover she had formed with them over her sorrow, thereby initiating a kind of physical tussle in which Gisèle, spent in the workings of her self-respect, crushed by so many blows, seemed to put up a spiteful struggle rather than unleash queenly revolt.

“So it’s true then that you’re in trouble?” he said, keeping hold of her hands as he stared straight into her eyes.

She nodded fiercely, causing a lengthy golden lock, freed from her coiffure, to lash across her face. Choking sobs wracked her breast. He went on, mixing authority with sweetness:

“Aren’t you sorry for having been wicked enough not to open up to me from the beginning? Haven’t I forever been the one to find remedies for all troubles, to fashion the very things that will lift the shadows from those splendid eyes!”

She fought back, in a fit of anger against his flattering words; yet her two wrists were presently trapped within one commanding hand.

"I'll handle the essentials without delay, at once actually," he declared, "because the earliest possible, don't you think, would be best?..."

Saffre refrained from mentioning Jacques, from letting the husband's name ring out between them like an inconvenient distraction in this intimate encounter growing immeasurably more intense.

"I'll recruit him to my business, engage him in my affairs, actual affairs, I assure you!... How much shall I see that he makes this year?... starting immediately this month?... Twenty thousand francs?... Thirty thousand?... Name what you need at once..."

"No!" she gasped out, "it can't happen! This isn't what he was after... He'll never agree to be beholden to you in such a way. His self-esteem, his place in society won't suffer him to be reduced to some manner of hired hand..."

She struggled for breath, unable to argue further against what had turned into her most ardent hope, her cowardly and tremendous hope to deliver her husband, through absolute self-denial. Saffre went on browbeating her with solicitous language, at the same time familiarly

sweeping aside the screen of fallen locks that darkened her vision and masked her thinking.

“Really! His honour, his station would bar him from what these very things grant to so many others of the finest pedigree!… But contrarily, it’s the glory of high banking to have set up such cushy positions for various members of noble houses, in such a way as to handsomely support them without once letting them experience the indignity of feeling they earn their keep!… Ah! darling little thing, sweet child, don’t be stubborn about such trivial concerns. I’ll see to calming any imaginable touchiness. Put your faith in my inventiveness, my commitment, the passion of my urgings…”

And as if set ablaze by the very feelings he named, his daring gestures emphasised every phrase.

Morally torn apart by the torture-rack on which this day’s twin trials had wracked her soul, Giselle appeared to remain under the spell of her tormentor’s reasoning. Could she be surrendering to the notion that really, through some new order of things, the financial monarchs would from now on have the right to maintain a corps of the most impeccable blue bloods on their payroll,

and to acquire, whenever they wished, any of the titled ladies who took their eye in society? Or did it occur to her that the shameful seizure recently threatened against her husband's entire estate would begin by claiming her own flesh?

All at once, she rose up in protests that mingled curse and prayer beyond distinction. Utterly maddened, and hopelessly doubtful, alas! of where her duty lay, her honour seemed to her now, in this moment of crisis, as nothing more than the likely assassin of a dear life that must be saved at any cost. Her rescue would have required either aid from someone else which did not come, or the intimidation that the sound of her protests and menaces should have provoked. Still, in what was already a substantial career, the baron had never let himself be stopped by the protests he wrung from others, through whatever varied tactics he had used to see his ambitions, his covetousness, or his caprices succeed. And whenever he set about achieving his purpose, he wore as his breastplate a brazen contempt for any consequences that might follow.

In this instant when this creature—normally occupied with serious business and large-scale intrigues—heeded nothing but his beastly instincts, nothing could impress upon him the horror of his crime, not even the vicious bite of that other wild creature that left his face bleeding. Yet what self-serving fantasy did he not prefer to imagine, so mighty are the conceited and imperious self-deceptions of men! And did not he insist on seeing it as the shivering proof of irrepressible gratitude, as the ardent surrender of a spirit that had bodily suspended its hatred of her plight… Yes, thus his male presumption twisted what amounted to nothing more than the worst fits and agonies of utter desperation!…

At this point, the vanquisher's affectionate gratitude, his affected fragility united in beseechings for the gift of being pardoned. Yet Giselle seemed gone or lifeless, looking as though she no longer recognised what was real, could neither see, comprehend, nor credit anything of what had befallen her. And surely Baron Saffre would have provoked no further reaction from her, had he not, as he made ready to go, brought up the specific commitment that forced him to quit her presence so soon. Sud-

denly the young woman recalled where this creature needed to go back to, and whom he was about to encounter face to face! Giselle d'Exireuil's features twisted with dread. A single thought screamed within her, in that unique clarity achievable by those who, rising above the madness of suffering, victims of some vicious accident or horrific calamity, have heard their bones snap and felt their flesh torn apart: this was the shrieking knowledge that one could not be cured of, could never undo what had just been done to her!

V

Catherine Saffre

The Duke and Duchess of Laterrencoux had been keen to prevent their daughter's marriage from becoming a major society affair. Deep down, they had no taste for society, endured only those of their own rank, and considered virtually no one worthy of that distinction. Hence, by settling on late August and the private chapel of their château at Evecquefleur—one of their Seine-et-Marne summer retreats—they had kept the hordes at bay. Having sensibly resolved to arrange a lucrative marriage for their daughter, they had beforehand given up—in view of her middling dowry and homely aspect—all hope of acquiring a son-in-law equal to their standing. What made Roger d'Iancey relatively palatable was that his fortune and brilliant prospects were now

three generations removed from their notably distasteful low-born origins. People were beginning to forget that all this splendid property had originated with old Chabouillaud, long departed, through government contracts, sewerage digging, and repeated troubles with the courts. Yet the Duke and Duchess had made certain to position themselves with extreme discretion on equal footing with Roger's mother, the widowed Baroness d'Iancey, despite her having been born a Du Truffieux des Mouchelys. But the Baroness had, besides, around and behind her, the retired Commander des Mouchelys, along with a veritable parade of offspring, daughters-in-law, and sons-in-law. Far preferable to keep the witnesses few, rather than invite their mass speculation upon the plebeian, corpulent bearing and coarse physiognomy that characterised the family the Laterrencoux were connecting themselves to. Driven by their ancestor's robust vitality and Auvergne blood, those folk had remained Chabouillaud in every fibre. The château's guest rooms were offered only to the most intimate relations: the Baron and Baroness de Beaujolais, the Count de Vaudemont, the Ponthieus, the Coucys, and the Marquis de Renève by virtue of close

kinship. As for the chapel ceremony during the marriage blessing, there was never any thought of including more than some thirty persons, over and above the servants and tenantry. This hand-picked selection comprised only the Duke's long-standing friends, fellows of the Union, the Jockey, the Agricole, or the Rue Royale clubs, together with Monsieur and Madame Bertin-Portier, the newly arrived proprietors of an adjacent château. The Bertin-Portiers had already set up a nursery, paid for the fitting-out of the independent school; and the Duke of Laterrencoux was scheming to rope them into the expenses of the newspaper which endorsed his General Council bid, without result, triennually. Therefore nobody external to the two families had any right to feel aggrieved at not featuring on so stringently bounded a list of guests. Even so, it came as a real heartache to Marie-Blanche de Grommelain to find herself barred from Roger's nuptials. From a somewhat curt note of his, she had learnt there would be no party to mark the occasion, and that the religious office would be accomplished with only the closest few present.

Nonetheless, some fifteen days before the event was due to take place, she had made up her mind to go and stay with Arthur, her brother, at Meulette Manor, chiefly because of its convenient five-kilometre distance from Evecquefleur.

There, Catherine Saffre offered a domestic hospitality, one of intentional restraint and good sense. The estate spread wide and hilly, sectioned into patches of light and shade, with the dwelling perched on high ground that blessed it with pleasantly dry atmosphere. Summer after summer, Catherine's daughter would come, listless from her time in Paris, but before long—with happy shouts and her little arms taking wing—she would regain her vitality by wandering freely outdoors and revelling in the wind. Arthur Saffre had set up in this haven the library his research demanded, the writing studio where his slight frame and the small-scale determination of his scholarly ambitions churned out pamphlets, developed 'papers', honed booklets, and re-honed learned tracts.

During this period, Baroness Saffre had likewise taken up residence at her daughter-in-law's, before heading off to the spa resort for the second of her annual treatments.

To whatever degree she was capable of attachments, she seemed to have developed one for this comfortable, thoroughly enclosed property, whose tree-lined paths she would traverse every afternoon under the lindens or chestnuts, keeping up the plucky regularity of her unending convalescence.

Marie-Blanche had made Roger aware she was residing close to Evecquefleur. In vague terms, he had led her to anticipate a visit; however, he displayed no rush at all to carry it out. As a way to fool her impatience, she had started taking twice her usual morphine. However, if this had brought about a certain benumbing of her pique, she held just as tightly to her belief that she deserved better than an outsider's treatment at this ducal wedding. She occupied herself for some time with efforts to have her sister-in-law take her to call on the Laterrencoux. But Catherine Saffre's sense of what was proper would not permit her to rush inopportunely the yearly call she was accustomed to making on them out of plain neighbourly civility.

More than once, Marie-Blanche, keeping her destination secret, had taken off by herself in the small pony-

drawn carriage. She had travelled at full trot until she reached the point where Evecquefleur's tall park railings barred her way. But the manor house and its inhabitants alike had stayed out of her view. All she had seen were broad, empty avenues, dark and gloomy far off under the trees. And she found it insufferable that Roger, there inside, might fancy himself, as though in the thickness of some holy wood, protected from the rightful claims of a mistress whose memory he was blaspheming by not inviting her to witness his marriage. There existed in this thought a degree of vexation that would not give way even to ten shots from the magic needle. For now, Marie-Blanche was thrown off her habitual course. The thought of securing a replacement lover in this enforced vacancy did not even cross her mind. Her imagination, blazing with myriad hues before her eyes, whirled and flapped in her head like a battle standard, though always bound to the mast of this fixation that Roger could not fail to honour his obligation of reserving her a place amongst the Laterrencoux… Really now! If men getting married were adopting the practice of keeping their fashionable mistresses from the church, how would such women hence-

forth be distinguished from those who were not of their class? On one of the outings that saw her lurking about the entrances to Evecquefleur, Marie-Blanche, her senses this time more corrupted than normal by the morphine, believed she heard voices… It appeared to her that from behind the fences, she was being called by someone racing alongside those never-ending walls at the same speed as her cantering pony. She drew rein… And the illusion, in turn, vanished instantaneously…

But the animosity lingered on…

Some days before the nuptials were to take place, Catherine Saffre was most startled to witness Roger d'Iancey turning up at the manor house of Meulette on horseback one morning. His manner was one of considerable anxiety, and his justifications for coming at such an unusual hour rang hollow. In light of this, Catherine, understanding that this was the best she could do, took immediate steps to enable a discreet tête-à-tête between Roger and Marie-Blanche.

He was anxious to alert Marie-Blanche to an extremely unpleasant development concerning the pair of them, one that continued to repeat itself each day. Of

late, he had become the target of a barrage of nameless letters; and those around him at Evecquefleur were just as beleaguered. The thrust of this puzzling correspondence concerned the liaison between Roger and the Countess of Grommelain, their intimacy being either condemned or exposed by the writer in the most compromising expressions and particulars. Composed in block letters throughout, the writing was therefore characterless, and one could not make out any distinctive penmanship. These missives were sent from various posting places, but all within the locality; several had been dropped right into the castle's letterbox itself. Roger was utterly bewildered with guesswork. He had suspected everyone in turn: family members, friends, and servants alike. At one point, he had suspected that Marie-Blanche's maid—who, in those parts, lived alongside her mistress—was uniquely placed to undertake such astute spying. Yet he was promptly driven to rule out this possibility, considering how the creator of these hellish letters wallowed, with curious wickedness, in intimate details that seemed prodigiously impossible for any third party to know. Even Roger could not have disclosed such

details—and neither could Marie-Blanche! Duke, Duchess, and their daughter's bridegroom-to-be alike were by turns the targets of these mailings which, arriving a bit earlier, might have served as cause for calling off the match, and whose impact was nonetheless highly uncomfortable.

Yet Roger could draw no helpful insights from the Countess de Grommelain.

She seemed happy to confine herself to showing utter disdain, refusing to enter into any discussion of these vulgarities. She actually refused, with gentle firmness, to handle any of the papers Roger had brought for her inspection.

"No!' she exclaimed with an air of gallant cordiality, 'put that away, my friend... I won't read a word of it. There's no use... absolutely no use..."

"But lend me a hand, won't you,' he urged... 'Can't you suggest an idea, a doubt, about anyone at all?"

She performed a movement combining sorrow with generosity, one of those serpentine tilts of the head where one forgives out of sheer scorn. She allowed herself the satisfaction of replying as if Roger's sole worry, in this

whole business, had been on her account, as if his distress stemmed from anything but what might endanger his reputation or disturb his wedding plans.

"I'm far above such miserable nonsense!' she announced. You needn't worry. I have no fear of anyone; nor do I worry about anyone targeting me… Anyway, this situation has turned out for the best in one respect, as it relieves me of any sadness I might have had about your wedding being practically a closed affair… In fact, even if you now wished for me to be there, you'd find it impossible to arrange… The outrage stirred up by these letters would prevent it entirely. And they've granted me this moment to see you, to convey my best wishes… I'm thoroughly consoled at last!…"

Roger observed the dreamy languor softening the sharp edges of her enticing face. He looked at her, faintly powdered, being at once more than female and thoroughly girlish in her deportment and bodily poses. Undoubtedly, studying his bride-to-be like this, he had never felt such intense arousal. Then too, inflamed by all those vivid memories these unsigned letters had brought

back to life, stirring up the ashes of their bygone intimacy, he started forward as though to kiss Marie-Blanche.

But she showed him out most affectionately. As things stood, her clever manoeuvre had produced pleasing results. She had discharged what she owed to her own sense of propriety. She glowed with the release of having shed a lengthy burden. She knew now that, despite everything, some aspect of her being would claim the foremost rank at the wedding in Evecquefleur's chapel. The impish recollection of her name, if nothing more, would hold court amongst lordly thoughts, facing the heraldic leopards, beneath the reverent brows of the Duke and Duchess of Laterrencoux.

Nevertheless, Catherine Saffre could not prevent herself from feeling moved to pity upon realising what her plotting sister-in-law was undoubtedly deprived of in this rural setting. The manor house at Meulette was completely bereft of any breed of man whose romantic overtures Marie-Blanche might have seized upon to feed the idle mechanisms of her womanly wiles. Matters grew even more cheerless once Grommelain turned up with his two boys, returning from Angers where he had thought it

proper to have them pay their respects to a dying relation with property to pass on. So Catherine's whole compassionate nature pitied the palpable loneliness that Marie-Blanche was plainly feeling, stuck between her mother and young ones, face to face with her husband, under her brother and sister-in-law's roof. In her role as proper lady of the manor, Catherine applied herself to orchestrating a liaison for the abandoned one, be it only a 'small flirtation', with Grommelain of all people. Furthermore, she reminded herself that she was thoroughly entitled to make such an effort, as Marie-Blanche had expressly requested it of her. It might have been born of a sudden fancy which the person concerned would not have continued to hold; yet it seemed fitting to restore her to that state. From that former day spent traipsing round the dress shops, Catherine's memory still preserved the stately air with which her friend had sought her aid regarding the matrimonial neglect imposed on her. Indeed, it made for an amusing memory, the contradictory way Marie-Blanche had acted, straight after denouncing—as a coming peril for her husband—his letting his marital claims fall by the wayside. Because shortly after-

wards, she had treated herself to a selection of scandalously costly underthings, wherein, by her own recent declaration, Grommelain evidently held no interest.

It was not long before Catherine raised with Grommelain the ticklish topic that had re-entered her head. The moment came of its own accord in one of those confidential talks that Grommelain actively enjoyed with his sister-in-law, during which his ill-tempered mood usually did not show through. Around Catherine, whose aristocratic origins made her his peer, he cast off the cold veneer of etiquette that he bore like chain mail amongst the Saffre tribe. Though the count and his sister-in-law seldom kept company, they were united by something more solid and profound than even wedlock: this joint characteristic of being individuals 'well-born'.

On one of their walks à deux through the grounds of Meulette, the subject arose of Marie-Blanche's health, a matter of mild anxiety for Catherine who had no way of knowing that a daily administered poison was producing the malady. She remarked upon the jagged breaks in her laughter, curious twitches that minced her phrases, which made various words seem at times imprisoned and

almost feral, surprising in a mouth so habitually free. A dull metallic tint had furthermore invaded her eyelids, enlarging its scope below them and now lending violet undertones through its dark reflections to Marie-Blanche's splendidly coloured eyes, in which the blue had once seemed to give off nearly pinkish gleams.

"Oh!" objected Grommelain, "if my wife's system is somewhat out of sorts just now, it's because she's been exiled to the country and can't quite settle into it. She must live at full throttle, forever pushing herself too hard. She'll be herself again once in Paris, come winter and the following spring. Then, I won't consider her symptoms alarming until she turns down an evening with supper, or has some unseemly diversion described to her without promptly beating her hands together and insisting we ought to go! No, my dear, there's no need for such hasty concern. We should only be concerned when my wife fails, even once, to round up less than half a dozen people when she's been stuck dining at our place by accident. As for me, I'll stay quite unworried so long as I haven't seen her opt, in the midst of the party season, to turn in now and then before three in the morning!"

"Presumably you don't press her to change her ways?" risked Catherine with a knowing smile that reinforced the point of her nimbly placed barb.

Grommelain glanced at his sister-in-law; and once he had convinced himself of what she had actually been trying to tell him, he responded with nothing more than a shrug.

However, this handy evasion did not suffice to rid him of the question. What faced him was womanly tenacity regarding that most intractable of matters, from which feminine nature and sisterhood of all women least readily retreat. Catherine went on:

"In this feverish pursuit of society that Marie-Blanche displays, which you plainly don't note with pleasure, couldn't there be something for which she's not to blame? … Such a frantic craving for diversions, seeking to be fêted and flattered, doesn't that speak more to the unease of a woman who's been made to doubt her power to charm? Who can tell if she isn't hunting in the crowd's eyes for confirmation she's still young and beautiful, and validation of an appeal which… possibly… a certain per-

son has slowly become accustomed to treating with… shall we say… indifference?"

Grommelain's expression had grown distinctly put out.

"Has my wife, by any chance," he asked, "been providing you with details of our intimate affairs that I could well term treacherous?"

Thus he made no effort to refute it. Yet not wishing to poison things further, Catherine wanted first to clear her sister-in-law of blame and conceal her lapse in discretion, retorting:

"Am I not privileged, here in these parts, to act as your innkeeper of sorts? If I discharge these functions with some merits, pray excuse the faults that come with it. By way of example, wasn't it natural for my curiosity to note which bedroom you picked from those I made available? … As it happens, you opted for the one most removed from your wife, the most distant, the most cut off. And regarding that, I could hardly help making my own little conclusions…"

Grommelain maintained a distrustful silence. With the leisurely gait of their purposeless stroll, the pair had

wandered down the grounds to the river's edge. They came to rest on a stone bench thick with moss, where an avenue of manicured yews concluded in two walls of greenery. In this spot, drooping branches fashioned a melancholy bower and a hideaway for private disclosures.

"Regarding this whole matter," Catherine went on obstinately, "I've fancied there might only be crossed wires between you. I put it down to your wife's bruised self-esteem, which is neither unflattering for you to admit nor troublesome to clear up."

Several times he shook his head, lips pressed tight in a triple denial. Still Catherine would not let go. By this stage, she had abandoned hope of securing much for Marie-Blanche; but thoroughly intrigued now, she plagued her brother-in-law through sheer devilment, insisting he at least appease her with some sort of excuse.

"Look here," she suggested slyly, "there's more than a woman's self-regard at play in this situation! Wouldn't it also send her into a frenzy, not simply with suspicions, but with clear grounds, with what you might call tangible proof?..."

"Proof of what?" broke in Grommelain.

"…That she's justified in being jealous!"

Hearing this, he exploded in a vicious laugh. And without warning, he gave way to the need to drop momentarily the exhausting mask he presented to society, and to breathe unfettered for an instant. For a brief moment it was soothing, in front of one of his kin, to unveil finally an understanding of matters that, when all was said and done, he took pride in being able to voice with his unmasked face. He pronounced in a low voice, which nevertheless carried a torrent of hatred long held back:

"Never!… I'll never provide her with that pretext to abandon all restraint. Avoiding all closeness with her is my sole assurance she won't venture to burden me with fatherhood. This way, I should be safe from so shameless an insult!… Or else!… if that happens!…"

And his gestures suggested that if his wife failed to maintain this supreme discretion, this last shred of tact and forbearance, then the last grain of social grace would have perished from the world; then would come the end of all order, the ruin of the last conservative bastions, the Commune, lawlessness lodged in his wife's very entrails.

Catherine gaped in astonishment, eyes shining with wonder, faced with this lucid understanding of his predicament that her brother-in-law had unexpectedly laid bare. Nonetheless, through that aristocratic intuition—the same blue blood that flowed in Grommelain—she found herself instantly imbued with the very sentiment that animated him. She could see by what inherited principles this husband—remarkably patient with conduct that would upend, demolish and blow apart the conjugal world of lesser men—concentrated his fastidious and uncompromising anxieties entirely on the legitimacy of his bloodline.

Reverting to dissemblance, Grommelain muttered, as if to vindicate his indulgence of his wife's behaviour:

"After all, she's the mother of my children!"

This proved perfectly in keeping with his principle that the issue of paternity trumped all other concerns. However, he had a more elevated reason still, one he was keeping in reserve for now.

From then on, they talked of nothing but commonplace things. Any warning from Grommelain to Catherine about not exposing his indiscreet revelations to Marie-

Blanche would have been quite unnecessary. For those of their breeding, discretion was an unspoken rule; their confidences possessed the dignity of diplomatic secrets, never to leave the inner chambers of their mutually exalted trust.

On the morrow, Baron Saffre, rendered nearly sick by grave speculation troubles, had likewise arrived at Meulette manor for a day's stay, seeking rest.

Urgent cables bearing troubling news had come thick and fast from London and Amsterdam. It concerned the payment defaults of two premier banks, which leaned on him just as he leaned on them, in an enormous syndicate for controlling the silver bullion trade.

Having triumphed so often in the arena of business, Baron Saffre was now watching former allies turn against him—men he had enriched and who had erstwhile been the shrewd lieutenants implementing his financial designs.

The strange grimness marking her father-in-law's face caught Catherine's attention immediately. Indeed, he only partially hid from her the pressure overwhelming his mind, bemused by this uncharacteristic wavering that

saw him, for the first time, questioning his providential luck.

The day was oppressively hot with nerve-wracking thunderstorms brewing. Settled on the terrace facing the house, with Catherine and her little girl, Saffre watched the pile-up of clouds at the horizon, their ponderous shapes and metallic sheen mirroring his own dark musings. Having lifted his granddaughter onto his lap, he questioned her with a look which, beneath its ingrained toughness, had become, at that instant, genuinely that of a grandfather:

“Do you know what good it does men to study the past?...”

When the little girl, abashed, shook her head and managed to wriggle away, the baron went on, turning to his daughter-in-law:

“It cannot ever inspire them, but simply makes them afraid right when they’re in the thick of their schemes’ ups and downs. Examples from history never stay anyone’s hand; but in the heat of action, their ill-omened memories surface to unsettle our vigour and cripple our capabilities... Tell me, is there any stupider maxim than:

‘The Tarpeian Rock is but a step from the Capitol’? How many times must it have preyed upon brains that needed nothing more than to preserve their self-trust unblemished?… The thing is, my dear child, nowhere are we more prone to superstition, mark my words, than during the lulls in a momentous fight, in those reprieves when you realise how tired you are and which put off the resolution you’re impatient to see!”

Catherine made several courteous attempts to break in and change the course of her father-in-law’s musings. But something like a compulsive urge made him press on:

“You see, these past eighty years, history has given us —and continues to teach us—a new word for discouragement. Waterloo is what I’m talking about—the thought that inevitably comes to those who, having made endless efforts and gained immense results, see themselves thrown back into battle with overwhelming odds. Quite so! We’ve thereby made commonplace an extra piece of vocabulary, spread yet another idea to dishearten those called upon to confront a league of opposing forces… Waterloo denotes a particular breed of human calamity that in bygone days had yet to find its proper name, that

had no precise expression in the lexicon of fortune's twists. Up to that point, anyone setting out on bold undertakings knew full well, by Jove, that it could all go wrong. However, for want of its scientific label, no one foresaw, everyone forgot, all were blind to the exact circumstance by which one was destined to fall. The curse of Waterloo, just as Bright's disease, is now codified and casts its fatal shadow over the misgivings of some of our contemporaries. Of course, the disaster of defeat was well-known and as old as time; but it was an understanding that remained fuzzy, ill-defined, with no memorable phrase to capture it… Waterloo!… These three syllables have summed up and sealed the irrevocable fate of more than one life. They hang suspended in our imagination by the striking arrangement of their two 'v's and two 'o's…" "Waterloo," he repeated, bizarrely rolling the word's dreary sound around his ear… "Waterloo!…"

"Still," Catherine rejoined with good humour, "remember that to risk a Waterloo, one must have all of Europe as one's enemy!"

"Bah!" Saffre countered, his delivery becoming pointedly evasive, "can't such a thing always come round

again?... Suppose all the banks, all the bourses of Europe formed a devilish coalition against a single man's financial strategy, against the empire of a capital king whose final gambit was in play... A beautiful setup, in any case, for swapping masterful strikes!"

Catherine, taking her cue from the lighter manner he had just resumed, raised a finger in mock-threatening gaiety as she replied:

"Mind yourself!... You oughtn't to speak in such fashion before your enemies. They'd be quick to spread word that you're afflicted not with megalomania—since you're entitled to rank yourself among the mighty—but with paranoia."

Baron Saffre wore that look of soundless mirth that would sometimes grip his robust jaw for a few seconds, as though he wished to ease the strain on the powerful machinery of his nerves.

He pressed his singular and immense giant's brow with a gesture of unwavering assurance about the calculations occurring inside. And seeking to alter the tenor of their exchange, he turned to a different subject on his mind.

“Have I mentioned that I’ve found a place for the worthy Exireuil in my employ?”

Although Catherine knew of this situation through Marie-Blanche, she acted uninformed and took pains to say nothing more than:

“No… You’ve not told me anything about it. Is this something new?”

“It’s only a month old. I’d long acknowledged the need to secure a very proper sort of person as my aide. I had to have someone who might, to a certain extent, function as my head of office, or even as a representative… You see that I persist in thinking big?…”

To steady himself, perhaps, Saffre mustered up another artificial laugh and pressed forward:

“Up to now, I’ve only had occasion to praise myself for this appointment. Exireuil has already completed a mission to Frankfurt most ably. He has an invaluable knack for mastering the heart of business dealings. These days, I shouldn’t like to do without him.”

“He’s entirely done for financially, is he not?”

“I regret to say it appears so… Whatever the case, he was hoping to undertake something financially rewarding.”

“And how fortunate for him that you happened along.”

Catherine had offered this comment without so much as a flicker. Saffre, though keenly observant, could make out nothing save what appeared to be acknowledgement of his obliging nature and liberality.

“My strongest motive,” he continued, “for thinking well of the lad from the start, is that his family, if I’m not mistaken, had been on regular terms with your own?…”

Saffre kept observing his daughter-in-law’s face with care, dispensing each word guardedly, in the manner of someone picking their way along a perilous track.

“I was likewise convinced,” he suggested, “that you held him in friendly regard?…”

“That hasn’t changed.”

This came across somewhat tersely. There was a short pause, at the end of which Catherine, elaborating on her answer, adorned its meaning in this fashion:

“Seeing as life has become hard on him, I’m bound to feel all the more sympathetic.”

“Very good!” Saffre punctuated, “I’m happy to find you so disposed… What was mine to do, I’ve done most willingly for a man of impeccable breeding, whom I saw fallen to the gravest extremity… But you, dear girl, with your particular grace, are alone able to help me bring this good deed to fruition…”

“Indeed?… How so, exactly?”

The grand baron paused awkwardly, becoming more and more enmeshed in the double entendres into which his phrases were inadvertently sliding. He chanced:

“When I presented him with the position he took, Exireuil actually displayed much reluctance… He was anxious about suffering, in some measure, a fall in society…”

Catherine nodded along, solemnly concurring, as would someone who takes in only what is virtuous, natural, seemly and sincere in what is being expressed.

Saffre tried another approach:

“I’d prefer if those close to me, so as to perfect this modest charitable act, would assist this unfortunate

chap's struggles to retain his proper rank in society. I'll direct my daughters to prove themselves especially accommodating to him… And you, in particular, I urge you to establish most affectionately his place among your relations, your diversions… your gatherings…"

His daughter-in-law kept inclining her head in like manner, with a straightforward air of compliance and regard. Spurred on by nearly touching the target of his attempt, Saffre gathered himself for one final push:

"For example, when I come back for several days, you could possibly have him here with me… They make a lovely pair!" he wrapped up cleverly.

"Still," Catherine pointed out, "there's a complication. I shall in all likelihood have my mother-in-law residing here at that time…"

Just at that instant, the woman herself was approaching, having made an expedition through the vine pergolas where going to see the grapes develop was maybe the single pastime to which she appeared drawn. Dressed in black with her slight frame, the diaphanous pallor of her features lending her a ghostly quality, she came on with the clipped pace of her sickly yet firm carriage. The little

Grommelains, chasing each other and romping around her, seemed to her, by the manner of her indifference, neither more nor less than a brace of greyhound pups.

Saffre had visibly flinched at his daughter-in-law's counter.

"What's my wife's presence got to do with the matter at hand?"

But she clarified, with perfect composure:

"It's simply the lack of room. You're well aware that, so long as my mother-in-law honours us by staying here, she needs three rooms for her use: one for receiving, one for retiring, and one close by for her lady's maid as well."

Catherine got up, all smiles towards the father-in-law she was taking leave of and the mother-in-law coming her way, going forth to greet the latter and ask how she was faring this afternoon.

Left to himself in this way, Baron Saffre remained lost in thought for quite some time. His mind dwelt on the incident, by now almost remote, that had taken place between him and Giselle d'Exireuil.

Through the early days following that encounter, whatever sentiment it had left him with had been quickly

shoved away, forced back into himself. Strange reversals in his financial affairs had sent his brain into chaos, flooding it with an extraordinary swirl of ideas as emotions heaved about in huge masses. However, Saffre had instantly held onto the knowledge that this remembrance of the woman could never be erased. He understood it to be only misplaced amongst the heaps of concerns, across a fearsome pile-up of developments, in this muddle of peril that had settled in.

On a single occasion, the Baron had encountered Madame d'Exireuil again, having contrived to be returned to her company via a dinner invitation from her husband. To achieve this, he had simply needed to let the man understand that, with the Baroness Saffre and all his people off on their summer retreat, he was left that evening to dine alone like a bachelor in his house.

In actual fact, the Baron had been thoroughly nonplussed by the young lady's bearing. She had displayed only glacial courtesy towards him. And what proved most deflating was her manner of seeming entirely oblivious to that which he had so smugly believed he would make her remember at first glance. He had presented himself

seized by a curiosity, acute and forceful as a small fixation, to study how Madame d'Exireuil would manage herself under the pressure of her husband's third-party presence. He was impatient to watch her reveal through her demeanour the feelings of their shared secret that must be eating away at her. Still, the lone display of emotion he succeeded in catching all evening was a passing flash of hatred, aimed not at him but at Jacques d'Exireuil, which went unnoticed by the man. Multiple times, she looked as if she wished to annihilate him with blazing glances when he luxuriated in servile eagerness towards the Baron or in light allusions to being moved by his debt to him. Thus, what Saffre had inferred from Madame d'Exireuil's demeanour was that everything would be back to square one with her when he felt so inclined. Thinking it over, this prospect no longer put him out. Obviously, such a woman was a prize who would perpetually resist, never to be brought to heel save through violence behind locked doors. Yet Saffre had grounds to believe that one could at minimum abuse her trust without her breaking silence, complaining to those who mattered, or raising a scandal. Indeed, he actually

appreciated her for becoming more savage precisely because she had been conquered, and for being the type one could only hope to have completely after several attempts.

With the years, furthermore, Saffre's disposition had taught itself to amass a collection of cerebral satisfactions. And it provided him with ample satisfaction just to recall the image of a judiciously chosen woman, founded upon his having possessed her. The ineffaceable memory of so mysterious an affair continued to belong to him as a permanent asset, ever tangible and living beyond the moments when he had held its realities close.

Thus Saffre, by remembering the episodes and the sight of Giselle d'Exireuil's downfall, succeeded at present in distinguishing nothing beyond it. He endeavoured thereby to chase off the spectres of ruinous dealings that kept coming back to torment him, on this terrace of the Meulette estate where he continued dwelling alone. And, delving with unwholesome nervousness into the most secret chambers of his being, he forgot himself whilst privately perusing the mental album of vice, with its improper prints, of his bygone romantic triumphs.

A few days on, with the Baron back at his business dealings, the Count and Countess de Grommelain likewise left for a visit to a pleasant château owned by friends in Touraine.

The residence of Arthur Saffre now gave shelter to none but the Baroness, to whom Catherine had assigned a penniless cousin and an aged unmarried lady from the Valdrenne family.

During this time, the Marquis de Renève, seizing upon the formal event which had occasioned his journey to Evecquefleur, paid a visit to the manor within two days of arriving, where he was prevailed upon to remain for the evening meal.

Catherine busied herself prodigiously to bring life to the withdrawn existence where her summers slipped away so sombrely, striving to make the place welcoming for the young fellow during his fleeting presence.

The young man acknowledged to himself that he had not decipher a thing about his fair friend’s disposition, though for months he had besieged her with attentions so passionate, so sweetly endured, yet so entirely without result. To what did her mind forever drift so hazily? What

secret something was she still hoping life would bring her? Or did she not rather betray an absolute surrender in the listlessness of her glance, whose only conceivable description was that it seemed to drift down from an invisible keep in which she found herself enslaved? For all her vehement objections, he had almost forced from her an acknowledgement of what was clearly true—that she could feel no love for her husband. Indeed, save for her child, she might well cherish nothing on earth but the sophisticated appeal and polished manner which the fetching marquis exuded. He had the impression she had all but admitted this to him, or at the very least left him free to infer. There were occasions he could remember when his mind's eye had caught her about to overflow with tenderness for him; yet those were the very times she had deployed her most cutting wit to leave them both frozen stiff.

Catherine, in greeting him that afternoon, bestowed freely the sparkling repartee and joie de vivre he had grown used to inspiring in her, leaving him faintly comforted but no longer taken in. By virtue of her loving assertions, he willingly conceded that his being there illu-

minated her spirits; still, he was watchful for the unexpected coldness that might spring from the most trivial cause. Renève was beyond hoping now. Those times were behind him when he had pleaded with her in tears, all in vain, to take pity on him. Even so, those late afternoon hours in each other's company flew past, approaching happiness in their utter inconsequence. The pleasure through which Renève felt himself despicably chained to Catherine lay in imagining he was patently the single soul who could have captured her heart. And thence also came his dying rebellions, ever more infrequent, whenever he came to realise he would never win her no matter what.

Once dinner was over, Catherine's invitation for a walk on the terrace drew no one but Renève. Before long the two of them emerged into the loveliness of a balmy and luminous evening.

"What a quiet mood you're in!" she remarked when a minute or two had passed.

He beheld the glorious shape she formed there in the moonshine. In neat lacquered footwear, she wielded a tall cane fashioned from reed. Her entirely white gown featured scarlet watered-silk facings on the bodice, lending

her an air of soldierly fearlessness. A hat with sweeping brims over the ebony sheen of her locks made her seem like some grand dame from the Chouannerie on a night campaign.

“I was thinking,” he murmured wistfully, “about the different fate you might have been willing to bestow on me, had we belonged to another age… No doubt we’d have been swept up, shoulder to shoulder, in fiercer happenings that could have inspired you to feel something for me… something I’d have joyfully bought with my own blood!”

“What’s the use of getting lost,” she responded with a melancholy tone, “in the infinities of time? It’s much too boundless! What were the odds we’d have found each other then? You see, we live in the same era, we’re of an age, from the same town; and it still wasn’t enough to unite us in marriage!…”

“And supposing we’d come together in good time, we wouldn’t have been permitted to anyhow!”

She searched his face to confirm that his allusion to what prevented their union was exactly what she had instantly suspected: the foremost reason of all—neither

had a penny to their name. His forlorn little gesture gave her all the answer she needed to a query left unuttered.

“How sad!” she breathed with all the feeling in her breast.

Once more he let out a sigh, lacking the courage to meet her gaze:

“If you could love me the way I love you, you’d forget entirely that we’re not wed!…”

“How could I possibly forget I’m already someone else’s wife?”

In spite of himself, Renève was pulled into this sparring match where time and again she had torn his heart to pieces.

“Tell me,” he continued with rising passion, “is it possible you value worldly conventions more than our natural right to possess and surrender to each other—something each of us knows as deeply as holy scripture?”

“You’re promoting the law of the jungle. We’re meant to differ from beasts through the very principles you deride as prejudices.”

“Right! To my mind, what’s truly bestial about humans is how they’re trained to follow convention, their

flock mentality, this ovine mimicry where they witlessly, readily take their cues from each other!... Indeed, it's handy to comply with conventions fixed permanently in place. The most ordinary gifts suffice to pass virtue's curriculum with flying colours and always profit thereafter..."

"So what is it you actually respect?"

"I hold that solely the unforced expression of elite souls contains anything genuine, lovely, or noble. I respect solely what originates in one's own genius, and what one uses to forge an exceptional way of being. Above all, I revere the wonders of passion, which alone can spark the full blossoming of one's soul and, with utter freedom of mind, carry one to the very summit of their being."

"How unfortunate," Catherine returned rather coldly, "that my perspective seems so blinkered to you...But then, you must let me rejoice, even so, that not everybody takes the liberty of ordering their existence to suit themselves... or should I say, to suit you... After all, what you've been aiming to establish is basically, correct me if I'm wrong, instruction on how to act regarding you..."

Their exchange had shed every trace of warmth. As always with Catherine's enigmatic emotions, once a hint of gentleness had broken through, they soon turned bitter as they closed in upon themselves. And Renève, spurred by pique into wanting to feel as unhappy with himself as she had left him feeling about her, replied:

"Tell me! What strikes you as so laudable and divine in the way conventional matters are carried out?"

"At the very least, we have them to thank for the family structure… And that's quite enough to hold in reverence!"

A mocking smile sketched itself on his lips.

"Come to think of it," he added, "speaking of family, the head of yours has asked me to convey something to you… Indeed, just before I left, I came across Baron Satfre at supper, fresh from his visit here…"

Catherine perceived all too well that malicious sarcasm was being smoothly prepared.

"And what has he requested of you on my behalf?"

Renève put on a display of wavering.

"The head of your family," he reiterated, "has entrusted me with the delicate task of finding out whether

you've any cause to be inhospitable to the Exireuils… My charge, thoroughly well-meaning, is to investigate discreetly what reservations you may… perchance… hold… most unfairly… against the young woman?…"

Catherine's lips tightened, causing her already haughty nostrils to pinch even more severely, emphasising their aquiline delicacy.

"I fail to see," she protested, "why you needed to act as go-between in this affair?"

"Funny you should ask—I've been puzzling over it too… I've struggled to understand what twisted logic made Baron Saffre believe he ought to seek my assistance—feeble as it is—in getting his son's wife to resolve favourably a matter dear to him… Yet for all my efforts, I can only come up with a single answer…"

"And that would be?"

The marquis stared at her with daring directness through the soft illumination of evening. Then, with all the grace of a seasoned libertine, showing that refined insolence of someone who had learnt from society exactly how much cheek one could get away with, he answered:

"Your husband's father evidently thinks we're having an affair… Now, now, don't be cross! Think about it instead… Or else, what possible cause would he have to seek my sway over his very own daughter-in-law?… And it's not my doing that he's singled me out as the one most fitting for you!…"

This spirited attack, as it happened, had not really ruffled Catherine's feathers… She said nothing, pondering things along the lines he had suggested. She was starting to grasp how the everyday train of living kept slipping from those conventions she had trustingly counted on to steer her fate along proper lines.

On the return leg of their promenade, they traversed the raised ground extending below the house front. Coming abreast of one of the ground floor's endmost windows, they stopped without thinking at the edge of its pool of light. At a desk piled high with thick tomes, under the strong light of a lamp, they could see Arthur Saffre supporting his small, wilful, frail head in meditation—every inch the aspiring academic laureate. Within easy grasp, sheaves of documents were tidily stacked; as his quill scratched away, loose pages would sporadically fill

with notes, then become cluttered with revisions. As soon as the meal was over, he had rushed away to work on his eventual entry to the Academy. His gaze, which drifted absently towards the outside from time to time, failed to spot the two sets of eyes that watched him from the darkness beyond his lamp's reach, dwelling jointly in their prolonged study of him.

Without speaking, Renève intercepted the gaze that Catherine, having no chance to lock eyes with her spouse, had merely let drift soundlessly into nothingness. And at that moment it felt almost materially real, emblematic even, that the connection of souls through their eyes was shared exclusively by these two onlookers gathered there. The dashing marquis glimpsed a passing look on his companion's face that at once caused his heart to beat frantically. Every shade of scorn emanated from this daughter of a sword-bearing race, this impeccably beautiful young woman, for the dim understudy who tormented her sight, for the one who, despite his unique privilege to love her, frittered himself away on other concerns.

“So you’d accept sharing me with… that?” she asked brusquely, in a manner that let her interlocutor proudly understand he was being ranked as peerless.

Until that very second, Renève had never been called upon to resolve what sacrifices he would endure to make her his. He muttered indistinctly:

“I imagine the creature rarely has the nerve to pester you?”

Now Catherine took her turn at causing herself even more harm, so that he too might feel the full weight of her suffering.

“Perhaps that’s where you’re mistaken!” she replied, raising her neck with spiteful grace.

He burned with jealous rage, his ears ringing with indignation.

“Give yourself to me,” he said, pulling himself near, “and leave him behind!”

She pulled away, her head swaying in a slow, anguished motion. Then, to put an end to it once and for all, she finally laid bare in several phrases her innermost conviction, the fundamental reason for the faithful devotion she maintained.

"No, I cannot take myself back from the man to whom I belong!... They traded me to him... I gave myself over... It's all above board and settled forever!... You know, my dear, I'm from a line where faithful service has always been given unstintingly, committing body and soul, until one's dying breath... For us females,' she declared with dignified, desperate firmness, yielding to the most hateful arrangement, growing faint with dread at our duty yet holding fast—that is our version of faithful service!..."

During this exchange of unparalleled candour between them, Renève had forfeited every advantage gained from his oft-repeated attempts with her. The dejection from his past and his solid commitments to wisdom had entirely vanished away. He had newly fashioned a childlike faith in heady possibilities. You see, he had glimpsed, in a manner of speaking, happiness itself, and all but its feasibility, drift close enough to touch. And he refused to believe this fantasy had left so swiftly, already faded within the spellbinding beauty of a finely brightened atmosphere, as if stretching toward infinite possibilities of love.

Catherine was starting to move away from him.

By now, she harboured deep resentment toward him for what she had disclosed of her inner self, and would neither hear him out nor compromise herself any more.

“Just hear me!” he hissed distractedly… “For the love of heaven, Catherine… Fine, yes!… Whatever needs be!… I agree to share you!…”

But in a moment she had placed herself beyond reach. Then, turning the doorknob of the glass-paned door facing outside, she declared with irrevocable verdict: “I don’t!… Never!”

Renève saw her silhouette sink away and vanish into the far reaches of the chamber where she moved to meet the intimate family circle made up of her remaining visitors. Having decided to follow in her footsteps, he remembered, in the jumble of his mind, without understanding why, that theory about the framework which had been described to him once. Had not he in fact just witnessed that this formed the foundation of resistance in a woman who was loved and clearly tormented by not being able to love back?… Yet, when showing the sovereign strength of money’s chains, Tarsul, in his pessimistic vein, had confined himself to considering nothing but

human cupidity. He had neglected to note the extraordinary purchase, the binding point that, for a few souls, occasionally, their uprightness could likewise present.

VI

The Princess Nagear

The Bréhands' hunt was set to begin the following day on the grounds of Ozerpie. They had succeeded in hosting at the château a small party of almost exclusively titled persons.

The Countess de Grommelain arrived earliest, with plenty of time to spare before the evening meal. A new dress was due to arrive from Paris; and there was also the matter of introducing to her sister and brother-in-law a lover who was, so to speak, equally new: young Lionel de Forléans, unearthed in Touraine, where she had had just enough time for a preliminary sampling.

Princess Nagear came accompanied by her brother, Prince Sopater, a strapping lad who immediately reminded Tarsul of Ali Baba in appearance, and whose

hands—so fluid in their movements—seemed those of forty swindlers rolled into one. No one had yet laid eyes on this exotic newcomer. However, he claimed rights to a throne; and such an unusual credential renders one presentable in nearly any company.

Lucierre's place had been laid as well, more in hope than expectation. Olivier could no longer conceive of any worthwhile gathering that did not include him; and this recent, gratifying connection involved his heart quite as much as his purse. The little viscount's outward flair had him utterly bewitched. In him, Olivier had discovered his dream template for the finer points of private sophistication: neckwear, views, linens, mannerisms and gloves. He could have kissed the ground where his chic had trodden. He was his pet "style-setter," as distinct from Tarsul, the serious sort, vexingly magisterial, the senior dispensing wisdom, his old buffer… Therefore, one of his beloved refrains would often be: "We're awaiting Lucierre."

On that particular evening at Ozerpie, when they were obliged to start dining without the latter—who nonetheless appeared at the second service— Olivier Bréhand got away with adjusting his formula's wording, but always

with that wheedling quality. And once he had presented his arm to Princess Nagear to enter the dining room, the manner in which he simply declared: “We shan’t wait for Lucierre!” showed him more in possession of himself than usual. He succeeded yet, up to a point, in enjoying the name of this friend who was dear to him in both meanings of the term, and in making a virtue of his absence.

The lord of the manor, as soon as they were at table, began holding forth about riding to hounds. It was a matter he had taken great pains to bone up on. And he dazed his small company by lavishly supplementing his roll-call of guest mounts and hound varieties with technical parlance, replete with faux rembûchements, d’hallalis courants, and viandis au gagnage. [*These are highly specialised French hunting terms from aristocratic venery (the art of hunting with hounds).* Faux rembûchements—*when a hunted stag doubles back to its original covert/hiding place to confuse the hounds, but it’s a “false” return (faux) - a deceptive manoeuvre. The stag pretends to re-enter the woods where it started but then slips away elsewhere.* Hhallalis courants—*the “hallali” is*

the kill or death of the hunted animal. "Courant" means running/in motion. So this refers to when the stag is killed while still running at full chase, rather than when cornered or at bay. Viandis au gagnage— *"viandis" is an old hunting term for stags (from "viande"— meat/venison). "Gagnage" refers to the feeding or grazing grounds where deer go to eat. So this means stags at their feeding areas.*] Tarsul enjoyed a pristine devilish pleasure observing how Olivier's lips, in uttering the aristocratic language of the hunt, seemed intent on absorbing some of their consecrated power. The strain of this inescapably common mouth trying to ennoble itself in this way revived the lines formerly carved by its small-time civil service resentments. And what a treat it was for the observer to witness the return—brought on by the grandest ambitions—of those querulous lines that years of supplication, or of carping once supervisors and sub-supervisors had turned away, must have undoubtedly etched there. Yet the newly-minted huntsman carried on getting progressively drunk on the "breeding" of his vocabulary; he felt himself elevated with it towards the superior echelons of fashionable life, wreathed in sport-

ing scents of kennels and mews, beastly sweat and untamed manure.

Grommelain's sister-in-law, wholly beholden for his willing assistance in bringing along her dear Lionel, effused about the accomplished air with which he spoke on these topics.

"Oh!" he declared with reverent self-importance, "I've been schooled by masters!... I've actually got a superb example of the most uncommon work, that good old Tarsul tracked down for me..."

Tarsul's lips curved in amusement. He alone, in fact, could make something of such occasions: a thin tome of six hundred verses worth twelve hundred francs.

"It's actually a poem by Saint Louis in person," resumed Olivier, "bearing Charles IX's armorial binding, wherein are described with absolute precision all techniques for finishing off a stag."

He had made every effort, in citing Saint Louis, to have his expertise appear to flow from such noble origins. And in proceeding to Charles IX, he gave Prince Sopater a knowing look, politely acknowledging him as though invoking crowned heads particularly concerned this

member of the audience—who was in the trade, so to speak.

Lucierre's tardy entrance, coming as it did at this juncture, merely spurred on Olivier Bréhand's passion for the chase. The latter set forth how in the early hours before dawn, he himself would work the trail of their quarry for the day's sport, scout far ahead, locate it in its covert, and lay down the branch signals with his own hands.

"Oh! Will you have me along?" the Princess Nagear exclaimed… I'm positively aching to try something of that kind."

Such forwardness might be seen as endearing impetuosity, just an outsider's spirited flouting of her adopted nation's social niceties. And Tarsul, that keen reader of character, recognised his Princess Nagear true to form, at once galvanised by the idea of artful intrigue, by a suspect passion for any opening towards obscure pursuit. One could not, in any case, be entirely up to the mark in divining her actual agenda in all its particulars without having overheard an exchange from several weeks past between her and her intimate confidante, the Marquise Gibralti.

“Anita dearest,” she had confided with a sigh, “I shan’t manage this year without someone worth over eighty thousand francs!…” And the pair’s calculating minds rapidly surveyed their social world for those measuring up to that amount. All the more so since the princess had drastically limited the scope by stipulating: “I can bear him being tiresome, but not nauseating!…”

Olivier, whatever else, was not off-putting. Yet he conducted himself with frustrating restraint; there was no hope of making him forsake caution born of fearing his wife. He could be counted on to withdraw doubly whenever the princess appeared ready to grant him preferred standing for any forward movement.

At this precise point in the meal, rather than offer any response to the invitation thrown at him, he had only managed an embarrassed chuckle, wrestling with the ignoble desire Princess Nagear evidently aroused in him. And his initial instinct was to spy out, by means of a rapid covert glance, what impact her careless overture might have had on Mme Bréhand.

By good luck, Olivier’s wife had not caught a word. She dedicated herself completely to the distinguished

dinner partner who had eventually claimed his spot after keeping it vacant at her side for such a time. Lucierre was in conversation about literature with the lady of the manor. Although he lacked any appetite for literature and she too had no love of it, he somehow never succeeded in discussing anything else with her. However, it was onto this field that chance had thrown them right from their earliest exchange. The ponderous, dragging sameness of such talk, their treading of water, had hollowed out a default track in the diminutive viscount's mind. His thoughts would always default to this whenever, typically lacking anything at all to say to Mme Bréhand, he was nonetheless expected to come up with something to talk about.

"Indeed," she was declaring, "I hardly read at all… There's no time for reading… There's such a lot to manage, simply staying on top of one's charity cases, to give an example!…"

For if Lucierre brought up literature with her, for lack of better options—thinking this topic most appropriate for her set—she came back with charitable works, think-

ing she thereby struck exactly the right note for his milieu.

“In any case,” remarked the Countess de Grommelain, “the novels coming out these days are scarcely inviting!… I picked one up recently: there were passages of such vulgarity!… Don’t the people writing these things understand that a lady of quality might read them?… I’d have been embarrassed to be discovered holding such a book.”

“Goodness me!” she ended without missing a beat, as if she had instinctively grouped this breach of decorum with countless other more obvious ones, aware from experience how much more mortifying it would have been to be observed in such situations.

“Wasn’t that Petite Mignonnette?” enquired Princess Nagear with a tempted air, familiar with just that one title since it had been enthusiastically suggested to her using much the same appreciative language.

Marie-Blanche indicated with a movement that she could not remember, observing:

“I don’t believe so… Though who knows?… The cover is yellowish…”

"For my part," announced Olivier Bréhand, "every so often I quite fancy reading novels in the former style—the sort with action on every page, amusing and smooth-reading, full of plots and figures you don't encounter in everyday life… However, what with this modern craze for realism and scrutiny, authors saddle us with entirely unexceptional types… On top of which, they inflict upon us each and every minutia of of such persons' existence!… Why should I care about discovering every last thought that could occur to people of either sex?… How is any of that remotely compelling?…

In his mind, Tarsul drew parallels between this disdain for psychological insight and the thorough enthusiasm Olivier had shown moments earlier while holding forth on cervine behaviour. Olivier himself had left nothing unsaid about the animal's ways. He had catalogued meticulously the creature's tricks and weaknesses, the full range of animal quirks, with the pedantic self-importance of a raconteur convinced he had penetrated the deer's very nature. Naturally Olivier had not the faintest idea he had carried out an exercise similar, on a smaller scale, to the novelists he reviled. However, where others endeav-

oured to explore the workings of human minds, he had limited himself to climbing scarcely higher than creature reflexes.

It was through this narrowness—Tarsul reflected throughout the remainder of the evening, during which the subject of riding to hounds arose time and again—that chatterers in Olivier Bréhand's mould invariably felt assured in their reasoning and thoroughly in control of their chosen subjects.

When the clock struck half past four before sunrise, Olivier was fully prepared to set off, the surrounding blackness showing no sign of lightening. On the great manor's stone porch, he had just finished a quiet consultation with the lead dog-handler, by whom his presence was expected. Next he went through to the dining hall, where, according to orders given the night before, a cold spread had been laid out on the buffet ledge for eating on one's feet.

No sooner had he helped himself than the door leading from the entrance hall came ajar. In walked Princess Nagear, wearing outdoor gear. The branching flame she had used to find her way amongst unlit corridors and

stairwells was raised high by her fine, strong-willed, gloveless hand. This luminous circle formed what might have been a glowing cushion of warmth, setting off the dishevelled, dreamy mess of her russet mane. Pallid from such an untimely start, she bore that nervous, disquieting air, that uncanny gaze characteristic of unnatural nocturnal stirrings.

Olivier bit back a shout. He felt simultaneously bedazzled and infuriated, beguiled yet scandalised by such glorious effrontery.

“I don’t believe it!” he muttered, “here you are?... What possessed you to think we might depart this way, just ourselves?”

“Pah!” she retorted with flawless insolence, “if I properly fancy something, I make certain to have it...”

“Whatever will they think of us?”

“Tosh! no one need know... You’re under no compulsion to speak of it. I give you my word I won’t go trumpeting it about... All we must do is get back whilst everyone’s still asleep...

For all his trepidation and temptation, Olivier had to admit that in two hours’ time, all the château’s inhabit-

ants would surely still be sleeping. Besides, the hounds-man—who as chaperone would provide, if nothing else, testimony to the propriety of their little adventure—was a man schooled in quietude by the woodland's hush, skilled at holding his tongue save when joining the chorus of hounds.

The princess, having dispensed with her light, said softly:

"There, there! Don't pull such a face… Why not tell me how I look in my hunting gear…"

She spun round on her toes, showing off with a single twirl her entire silhouette, her svelte middle, her brazenly full breast beneath a male dress-shirt. Sporting a short jacket, wide bloomer-style trousers, dainty felt headpiece and leggings round her calves, she trusted this mannish ensemble to highlight all the more thoroughly how utterly feminine she was.

"This is what I wear for cycling," she noted matter-of-factly.

She had been prudent enough to bring it with her, together with her side-saddle outfit and an entire selection of her ceremonial chemises, as she never journeyed

anywhere without being prepared for more or less any occasion.

“You know,” she went on, smiling in a way that made her face resemble a pretty little muzzle with mother-of-pearl teeth gleaming through… “I could do with a nibble too!”

Befuddled as he was, Olivier had forgotten to proffer her any refreshment. She would not accept plate or fork anyway. She plucked up a piece of tenderloin between her fingers and made short work of it. Upon helping herself to a splash of Frontignan, she forwent a separate glass that might betray signs of an intimate rendezvous.

“Mind if I use your glass?… Fellow sportsmen and all!” she quipped, twisting her neck in an amusingly flirtatious way to project her brilliantly rouged lips towards the wine she was bringing up.

Overplaying her struggle to keep her bulging chest-piece from the honeyed wine, she giggled over the rim rather than actually drinking, affecting a jaunty air with her unoccupied hand stuffed in her plus-fours pocket. She luxuriated with roguish determination in this playful

charade, another device that portrayed her as both jolly good sport and ravishing female.

Not long after, as day dawned, Olivier was suddenly aware of being outside with her, having neither composed himself nor fully realised what he had got himself into. Even so, as they distanced themselves from the château to gain the forest lanes, he looked over his shoulder more than once. This way he could ensure that all the front shutters—and crucially those of his wife's quarters—were still sealed tight. From this he recovered, if briefly, his capacity to breathe with greater ease. There was nearly a giddy sense of liberation as he played the dapper escort to the princess, once they were properly beneath the trees.

The keeper and his dog led the way, keeping well ahead of them. It was an altogether unprecedented situation for Olivier, following his years as a husband, to find himself walking abreast with temptation. His fiery nature had never undergone such a scorching test of propinquity as this, feeling himself rubbed against, brushed by, and most probably summoned to something more. The pleasure principle, hitherto cowed in him against all escapades, now rose in revolt, yearning finally for some-

thing beyond the ungainly obligation and neurotic exercise in which it had been abolished.

Several times, Olivier had needed to lend the princess a hand in negotiating a ditch or clambering up a mound. Every time, he had prolonged the moment past necessity, his hand enthralled by the beating warmth of life pressed against her torso, circling a firm arm, beneath the sweet curve where shoulder met body.

Words were few between them, and the scarcity of conversation seemed to heighten their pleasure. They found themselves in that frame of mind where life seems to run along on its own, and one says nothing for fear of breaking the spell, letting it quietly carry on at its chosen pace, to work whatever good it is apparently meant to bring you. The princess felt certain it would not be long before Olivier was hers. Olivier himself was certain he had obviously awakened a powerful passion, and—neither more nor less than the next fellow—did not seek to know why, thinking it quite natural.

By this time they had left the Carré d'Epagnères behind and traced the border of the Bois du Moulin. And keeping pace with the tracking dog on the scent, they now

came upon the clearing of l'Homme-Mort, which appeared to be where the expedition was headed.

Without warning, Olivier was pierced by a searing reflection that nothing special about that particular minute had provoked.

"Heavens above!" he exclaimed, "if my wife were to suspect I was here with you!… Oh my word!"

"She'd disapprove, then?" the princess asked, all wide-eyed innocence.

He was all but stunned that she had resorted to such pretty language for consequences he pictured as positively cataclysmic. He answered, in tones choked by the force of his certainty:

"It would be perfectly horrifying!"

"Yet what exactly are we doing that's reprehensible?"

"We're in each other's company without her present! Even at a soirée, she can't stand seeing me in conversation with a woman without sidling up every five minutes to tell me some nonsense or other!"

"To spy on what you're talking about?"

"No," he owned, "I'm careful never to say anything of consequence… It's to prove she owns me. She hurls

whatever phrase comes to mind, and it makes her feel she's got me back under her thumb. She passes me her fan to mind, a shawl, whatever will occupy me with her affairs and get in my way!…"

"She tags you like a seat that's taken, my dear man!… But then, if you chose to lose your heart to someone eventually, you'd just have to be clever about keeping it from her…"

Olivier nodded slowly. A game like that would be rough going indeed!

"I tell you, if by some misfortune she found me in the wrong, she'd make a tigress look tame!… Nothing would be beyond her then… Besides, she's made that perfectly clear… Not a single scruple would stop her! Nothing would make her flinch, nothing at all!" he insisted, giving vent to the grievance of a thickset stallion caged with unbearable stringency in his marital enclosure.

"Surely not!" protested the princess, gripped by a passing fear for her own safety, "you can't mean she'd stoop to acid attacks?"

"No!" Olivier declared grimly. "She's the type to initiate separation without batting an eyelid, without clemency, without an ounce of pity!..."

And for a good while his enthusiasm for the princess was wholly extinguished. The idea of being caught red-handed, even with her, felt like the chilliest of wake-up calls.

Dawn was now asserting itself beneath the forest's heavy foliage. The young woman, well-versed in the art of handling men, took it upon herself to steer her companion's mind elsewhere. She put on a display of keen interest in the venery unfolding before her, which had at this point found its stride. What is more, the crisp autumn breeze at sunrise lent a fresh rosy brilliance to her customarily golden Eastern features; and this chase after prey, this tracking of spoor through the woods, may also have been naturally pleasing to her. It was, in sum, a game of savages, whose outcome thrilled her flaring nostrils to anticipate that by nightfall, killing would taint the air and quivering guts would be steaming in the open.

As for Olivier, his position was similar to that of the bloodhound whose exertions he directed. The keeper fed

out the lead generously to the dog, giving it ample scope, but without ever completely releasing the animal. And regarding Olivier, who had picked up, as had the hound, a trace of flesh, who too had found his beast… a leash, in the same way, kept tugging from afar at his wants and restraining his urges.

They had now established beyond doubt that the animal was there. And judging by its hoofprint, by how high the branches were that it had brushed or pushed aside with its head to re-enter cover, they could conclude it was a ten-tined stag in its prime. That, at any rate, was what the handler explained to his employer.

As they headed back, Princess Nagear persisted in her studious manner, with the keen interest of a little barbarian. She asked to be told why the deer, with day now risen, would stay put in its cover without prompting until night came again, and how it would take nothing less than the full savagery of the hounds to force it out ahead of schedule. She clasped her hands together in mindless delight at entrapment—and with increased faith in her own plans—at being taught that a deer singled out for the taking was a deer shortly to be had. Her mind ranged

past this creature to quarry apparently far less catchable than any man, who however would likewise find no sanctuary, shortly, in the nearly impervious mystery of the great forest where he was still musing so unguardedly. Even as she envisioned him prudent and fugitive, she nevertheless beheld him enslaved by his desires and bodily needs, encircled by his predictable instincts like some manner of snare. And through a linking of ideas, she enmeshed Olivier in a net of looks where her green eyes flashed their spellbinding radiance like an enchantress's gems.

The return to the château was completed without difficulty around half past six, but with the most surreptitious vigilance.

The princess took leave of her companion, whispering goodbye on the bottom stair:

"Thank you for the delightful dream you've enabled me to live… I pray it doesn't come back as a nightmare for you!…"

Heartened by the inner darkness of the empty vestibule, Olivier had pressed his lips to a hand which his

temptress had nimbly stripped of its glove for just such an occasion.

“Oh!” he said under his breath, “I rather suspect I shan’t be able to get back to sleep!…”

“Silly child!” she said softly.

Even now, she was pleased with herself for having contrived to establish something clandestine between the two of them. A certain unspoken collusion had, after all, begun to bind them together in that uncertain half-light of daybreak through which they had lately meandered side by side.

The Princess Nagear, having tiptoed back to her quarters, was busy undressing when her door was ever so gently nudged ajar without the merest hint of sound. Scarcely believing such immense daring possible, even as the action itself bore witness to it, she choked down a triumphant cry that nearly overwhelmed her.

“Princess!” Olivier murmured in the softest possible breath.

“Oh!” she said back in barely a whisper… “This is wicked of you!… Utterly disgraceful!”

"No, it's your candlestick I'm bringing back," he murmured, catching his breath… "We almost let it be found downstairs!…"

And promptly he placed it in her hands, only making certain she had hold of it safely. He was careful not to look at anything else, drew the door closed with patient deliberation, and determinedly stole away on the tips of his toes.

The hunting party had arranged to gather at midday at the Quatre Croix des Coulevriniers, where a collection of saddled horses stood ready on the crossroads' corner. Facing them, the paired hunting dogs were grouped in a body and held at the ready. Together they made a tangle of white and buff fur, a living thicket whose tall shoots were their frenetically quivering tails. Anxious panting set their vermillion tongues wagging like jewelled drops, creating a soft hissing like summer winds. And as with a hive of buzzing bees, a single mood emanated from the pack, ceaselessly shot through by the fire of all those pitch-black eyes.

Olivier Bréhand, punctually in position, strode about restlessly, working himself up, immensely engaged in

doing absolutely nothing, his mind buffeted in fits and starts by reflections on Princess Nagear. With his liveried footmen, he was the sole one displaying his riding colours, bright scarlet adorned with silver trim. Some tactful restraint had decided him to avoid flaunting that he could afford to have all his trim in gold.

"The Marquis de Fé's very own dogs!" he kept saying with self-satisfied pride to M. de Nargencey, who, seconded by M. de Saint-Bel, had honoured his invitation.

These worthies—whose appearance affected their host at his most thankful and faithful point, in the dearest part of his heart—had arrived unaccompanied by their ladies, and somewhat as representatives of the other local gentry. Their purpose was to assess what place might be carved out, somewhere or other, for the Bréhands, along the fringes of rural social circles. These long-time participants in the Ozerpie chases had naturally been foremost in spotting the former equipage master's hounds. And you would need to be Olivier to miss seeing in their gaze that they were finding themselves with the hounds much more than with him, on these grounds from which one of

their set had been newly expelled. The new master, however, was delighting in what the patrician origins of his hounds meant, with complete ingenuousness, as elevation for his own status. In recently acquiring Baron de Foncedrecq's yearlings and fillies, his riches had already betrayed a distinct penchant for crested cast-offs, for noble bankruptcies. In the manner of those who buy property and assume its arms, Olivier, until he secured his own proper title, fancied himself baron of his purebloods, baron of his stable. And on this specific occasion, his pompous bearing all but required one to hail him as marquis of his hunting pack.

Madame Bréhand had come with Prince Sopater in the light carriage she herself was handling. Dressed in her riding costume as were the other women, she sported a three-cornered hat atop her plump cheeks, calculated to complete her image as a sportswoman. However, she and her husband had an unspoken agreement that the one mount she had ostensibly requested would somehow prove unobtainable at the eleventh hour. And so she would be obliged to pursue the chase by coach, sticking to the wheeled tracks.

Inside the shooting brake, Princess Nagear and Countess Grommelain had taken the back seat. Tarsul had come grudgingly to sit next to Lucierre. And Marie-Blanche herself had ordered Lionel de Forléans up alongside the coachman, for the driver's bench was exactly the proper spot for so young a gallant, whom she had not stopped tickling at the nape with her riding whip's end all along the way.

The meeting place saw them delayed by just a quarter of an hour whilst expecting the hired carriage in which Saffre was escorting Monsieur and Madame d'Exireuil from Paris. The baron dismounted nimbly, excusing himself airily, and above all anxious to aid Madame d'Exireuil, encumbered by her long riding habit, over the carriage step.

Their coming lent a note of stateliness to those present. There was, if nothing else, a demonstration of the respect reserved for that kind of royalty born of enormous fortune. A din of polite exchanges ensued, where the specific compliments each wanted to pay the baron became thoroughly mixed. Yet they all deferred to the Asian-style tribute Prince Sopater delivered in his

throaty voice, as if momentarily abdicating their own attempts. The gist involved comparing Saffre's arrival to the rising of the sun.

Already an attendant had produced the grey-dappled charger which, notable for its markings, similarly dwarfed all the other horses with its imposing height.

Villagers and those from nearby, who had arrived unbidden out of curiosity, mused that this superb estate, these woodlands, these coverts abundant with big game, these valleys graced with cottages and lakes, all this princely territory was owned by Saffre. Amongst these onlookers scattered at a respectful remove, there ran a subtle thrill of vassals receiving their sovereign. And at centre stage, the close-knit group seemed poised for something, awaiting permission perhaps, to break up the honorary circle that had quite naturally formed around the lord's mistress and the husband of his favourite.

How wrong! Giselle d'Exireuil was pitifully nothing beyond Saffre's bondwoman, his debased prey, his thing… And Jacques d'Exireuil, prancing about at present with lofty brow and raucous laughter, showing the jolly humour of his unreformable carelessness, was the very

same who, in the succession of recent weeks, had kept on playing the heedless helper of his wife's torturer, the unaware accomplice of the baron!... Ah! This one, what cat-and-mouse tactics, what cunning artistry he had used to bring Giselle to heel, to indulge his prurient desires with her, and nearly break her into docility at last! Because his new attempts to reassert himself over the young woman had speedily consumed his patience. He held it strongly against her that she had grown more impregnable than at first, as the resistance he met with, instead of springing from virtue alone, now stemmed from revulsion, scorn, hatred and bitter memory. But given that Giselle's wifely love was the single means he had uncovered to turn against her, he had applied himself to crushing that soft, bleeding heart between routine torment and exceptional agony.

Initially, by his benefactions towards Jacques, he had certainly intended to atone for his offence with the wife, to whom he thus ensured the faithful presence and safe existence of an adored spouse. And thereafter, from one day to the next, by adopting disappointed or disgruntled manners, he had steadily unnerved this husband in his

employ. He had given signs of implicitly endangering his renewed stability, his uncertain tomorrow. Such methods of tormenting had, besides, provided Saffre with real sadistic pleasure. Particularly because the brand of wickedness innate to his lustful nature, inflamed by the recent teetering of his fortune at the abyss's edge, had now risen in him to dizzying heights. He had revelled in the erosive action to be exercised on the wife through the husband himself, having returned him to her entirely lost, horrified at judging himself unfit for his task, corroded by doubt, spent from hope. Many times Jacques, no longer trusting in the continuance of his indispensable employment had returned home raising anew the most terrible of options. And with his moral fibre shaped and numbed by the baron, all he could do was sink into the arms his wife extended in her bewilderment, with her feverish desire to escape herself as well!... Inescapably, the point had been reached when Giselle d'Exireuil bowed to the absolute terms of a triumphant oppressor. It became an act of self-sacrifice, where she substituted herself for the dejected and haggard wreck whom she could not persuade to abandon so frightfully uneven a fight, nor suffer

to see returning daily more brutalised, more humiliated, more piteous. And thus there settled—with all its deceptive appearances, its hidden tragedies, its unknown undersides and endlessly shifting complexities—the peace of the triple alliance.

Out on the hunting grounds, everyone was up in the saddle. The dogs were loose and had begun picking up the trail. The riders of both sexes, following Olivier's lead, had broken into several groups proceeding at a walk.

At the back rode Tarsul, keeping pace with the great baron. He sought to rouse some appropriately lighthearted idea in his companion's mind, who by his sombre look seemed presently quite distant from any such thing.

"And Grommelain?" he asked. "What does he make of this hunting affair that's slipped through his fingers?"

Saffre's expression brightened with a spark.

"You can see for yourself: he hasn't shown up!"

"Well, that doesn't tell us much, seeing as his time wasn't his own… He's gone to Anjou, hasn't he? … looking after his old relation who's not long for this world… He'll be making a tidy sum from that inheritance, won't he?"

"Pfft! There's some hundreds of thousands to be had… But here's what I suggest: when you next meet him, make certain to declare that the opening hunt was superb, spectacular, an absolute coup! His wife may well report the opposite… But never mind that, he won't be certain which version to trust, and it'll give him no end of grief…"

"My word, it's absolutely marvellous how deeply you loathe the man!"

"Look here, old man, I like to think I'm tough as old boots… But I've not been able to avoid even one of the barbs that young man has taken pleasure in dealing me! If not for me, if not for the marriage portion I provided with Marie-Blanche, where would he be now? His fortune was eaten through. His noble rank and name, which he couldn't turn to profit, were nothing more than a mill-stone round his neck. He was bound to end up holed up in the back of beyond, living off little frauds perpetrated on the relation he's currently getting put under guardian-ship… Not that I say this to bemoan what I've given him. I don't begrudge him that. I'm not keeping a ledger with him… Keeping tabs isn't my way!" he declared with a

magnanimous sweep of his hand, stopping himself part-way through.

He always put on airs when recounting the banknotes he had forfeited, the files of them he had dispatched from his strongbox to oblivion. When he did this, he took on the munificent grandeur of a conquering king, for whom such tributes extracted from the masses cost nothing.

"What I cannot absolve in Monsieur my son-in-law," he went on, "is his manner from the first of accepting my largesse—not even as one who was accommodating me… for at least then I might have properly upbraided him… but as a man of breeding who graciously pretended he wasn't putting me under obligation! Leaving me without so much as an opening to voice displeasure! This fine shade of meaning, I've felt it constantly in our dealings, making my face burn as if from countless tiny slaps… Over and over, innumerable times, he's managed through mere nothings to make me feel that barely detectable barrier between someone of his class and all of us from mine. At every minor dispute, by something about his bearing, he always made clear he stood within a cordoned area opposite me, and that should I speak up, I must needs

call to him from beyond it, from my proper place. The manner in which he slighted me was never frontal, but worse yet: removed… I felt as though I kept colliding with some nameless thing that stood between him and me. You'd swear there were ghostly manservants about, by means of whom he ensured the gateway to any discussion was shut in my face…"

"Quite!" Tarsul affirmed, "that's exactly right—that's what comes of noble birth! Think about it—if they sent so many to the guillotine in the last century, I reckon this particular strain of arrogance was largely to blame. No other source of grudge could have been at play… The former aristocracy had had everything seized from them. Their special rights were done away with. And still, the people felt there remained one score to settle: the nobles' judgement of their inferiors… Oh yes! One could have forced the elite to disgorge their wealth, flattened all distinctions of rights and possessions, declared everyone equal! The issue remained unresolved with those who couldn't be made to surrender, from their innermost conviction, that they still possessed an inborn superiority over everyone else… What's to be done with people who,

from their very birth and because of it, will always be convinced they're above you? At most they'll agree to keep this conviction to themselves around those they look down upon; but nothing will ever dislodge it… And so, in those practical times of yore, people will have realised there was no cure for an arrogance that's all the more infuriating when felt but silent, concealed, unchallengeable! Not a thing to be done, not a word to be said against it… nothing, nothing… but the guillotine!

"Upon my soul, yes!" Saffre concluded with a twinge of longing for an age that would have been so fitting for his son-in-law Grommelain, and to which he cheerfully dispatched him, without himself being in any hurry to pay a visit.

In the meantime, the chase had been quickly joined and was proceeding apace. With the pack at his heels in mortal chase, the stag had initially struck out for the Champagne Shelter, springing over at Ravine Crossing. Then, wheeling round to the Chamber of Sparrows, he had made it to the Good Fathers' Crags, taking to the water there and confounding the pack for a spell.

To this point, Olivier Bréhand, keeping pace with the whipper-in, had shown remarkable form. Despite having worked at his riding since his nuptials, it ought to be remembered in his favour that he had only ever trained from boyhood in the paces of a footman in varying degrees of haste.

Still, the master of the hunt's mettle began to diminish after the game, having been singled out, had made off beyond Cerberus Thicket to reach the Mad Ass Paddock. By now Lucierre had pulled ahead of him. Yet he was somewhat comforted it should be this fellow, seeing as he had to be overtaken by someone.

Great peals of laughter came to his hearing. And down at the end of an alley, he caught sight of a duo galloping by who evidently could not care less about the hunt. His sister-in-law de Grommelain was larking about at brigands and lawmen with Lionel de Forléans, whose cap she had snatched, leaving him to chase her good-humouredly without it. A virtue one might, incidentally, credit to Marie-Blanche was knowing how to instinctively adjust her libertine ways to suit the temperament and years of her current gentlemen friends. Back in Roger d'Iancey's

day, she had tried on the airs of a dear little army wife; similarly, during the eras of Fompagne, Bourbebaux and various fleeting gentlemen's club types, one might find her finicky over dishes, affected in all matters, and unfailingly versed in what the typical broadsheets reported. This ready disposition to reinvent herself had done nothing but strengthen in her, invading all the workings of her character through her addiction to morphine.

Olivier had pushed onwards to Hanging Stone, where the hunt had presumably gone up. Then all at once, at the Bracken Circle, his mount almost crashed into Princess Nagear's, she too solitary, she too wandering, yet seeking solely him whose path she had managed to cut off at this precise moment.

"Which way should we go?" she asked in her breathlessness, the graces of her bodice all the more stirring for her shortness of breath.

"This way… who cares!" replied Olivier, digging in his spurs and heading randomly into whatever lay ahead.

He had initially obeyed the thought that, until someone else attached themselves or they caught up with

the chase, they should steer clear of roads along which his wife's phaeton could be travelling.

Together they vanished into the trees, arriving at rides so narrow they had to squeeze against one another, following those where they had already been pushed quite close. Now and then, they checked their pace to strain for the sound of baying or a horn's summons… But should a faint sound carry to them, they disagreed about where it had come from, and it became nothing more than an excuse to become more hopelessly lost… Coming out of the Ox's Throat, they tore along Matthew's Pond at breakneck speed, crossed through the Heath Section and the Fifteen Burnt Fields… And being far from any other being, the awareness of total seclusion, more and more enclosed them in a quiet exhilaration where nothing seemed forbidden any longer.

"Oh!" the princess sighed at last, "I'm completely exhausted… We should let the horses recover, and I need to rest a little…"

Made giddy by the open air and the fever of their frenzied ride, Olivier felt intensely aroused in his desires and transported with pleasure at her words. And seeing the

princess gesture to climb down from her mount, he hurriedly got off to aid her and gathered her in his arms. Instantly she had need to defend herself spiritedly, yet did so with nothing but bewildering feebleness.

“Oh my!” she exclaimed, “how absolutely delightful this place is!…”

They found themselves at the Vivier-Bleu, where amidst the heavy forest stood a little pond of transparent purity, taking in a round of blue sky and giving back its celestial gleam… Making a show of darting away, the princess reached the waterside in just a few quick steps, from which point she leaned down to catch sight of herself. So perilous was the curve of her flexible stance that Olivier was forced to spring towards her, clutching her, holding her fast, bearing her weight… Carried away by his actions thus far, a novel exhilaration seized him as he caught sight of their intimate entanglement in the water below. Dressed in his hunting costume, sporting a velvet hat and a blade dangling from a cross-belt at his flank, he looked to his own eyes like a hero from some tale of adventure. The reflection showed his splendid golden beard sending light ripples across the princess’s neck;

and through both vision and sensation, he was doubly aware of his arm clasping her waist… Who could withstand such a test, having neither love in another place nor any tenderness of conscience?… Nothing but instinct was summoned to rule on this conflict between enjoyment and duty, a choice this young man in full bloom was at last authorised to make… Oh! Such a difference from those vulgar forms, properly familiar through custom, whose excessively ready availability his merit had yet never found repugnant!… No longer did these riding habits conceal the tasteless compliance of femininity, but were battle-ready, tantalising, and devious in their guard! … Here, in this sylvan sanctuary where the everlasting odour of untamed rutting hung in the air, lay the fitting site for a grand blissful taking and the guilty hour of the most exquisite voluptuousness…

Olivier tightened his embrace, redoubled its binding, wound and rewound the tremulous cincture his vigorous biceps wrapped around his companion. Under such force, she leaned slowly backward, as if collapsing, in a capitulation that delivered her mouth to the lips of the triumphant man to whom she gave herself over. Olivier lost

himself in gratitude, in a stirring, first kiss that princely engagement dignified…

But suddenly, in that selfsame instant, stopping dead before further compromising himself, becoming utterly feral with spite against the one who had almost lured him to possibly ruinous action, he backed away from the seductress, nearly shoving her aside… Like a wraith of downfall, he had seen flash through his imagination an Olivier Bréhand informed upon, surprised in the act, pitilessly dragged through the courts, and thence stripped bare, forced to hand over his hunting knife, ostracised, seeking refuge as one separated by law, lugging the destitute's bundle of one parted from his wealth!… His flushed face fell apart. The thrumming of frantic flight battered his bulging temples, assailed his pinned-back ears; and, with his spirit fleeing, his eyes were fixed solely on his mount.

"I must get back!" he pronounced in a rough voice… "Rest a while longer… I'm the master of the hunt!…"

And, not pausing for an answer, he had already straddled his charger. The young lady—who was certainly knowledgeable about many things, ever since she had

been big enough to leave home without her governess—stood thunderstruck, completely wrong-footed. She watched with amazed eyes as he indicated with his finger a hillock she might use to help herself back into the saddle; and she faltered through perplexed thanks for the guidance the escapee flung her way, in his eagerness to be rid of her, neither displayed in transgression nor caught up with, should she still have such designs:

"Just go straight on until you come upon an obelisk… Then keep left all the way, and you'll reach the Four Crosses…"

The look on Olivier Bréhand's face, under the fractured gloss of his customary airs, exposed the nasty, boorish challenge with which a man with no foundational breeding makes peace with having perpetrated an indiscretion. With neck buried in his shoulders, he hunched his spine; and his upper lip had drawn up slightly, in a look of invincible loutishness. Off he galloped and was gone, to re-enter the hunt that, in any case, he only caught up with belatedly, well after Princess Nagear's own return, and when the only thing missing to make the

party whole was the stag, it too having exercised the confounding liberty of making off.

VII

The Count de Grommelain

From the succession of the relation whose death he had just overseen, Grommelain's inheritance totalled around forty thousand francs in yearly revenue. As soon as he received the conclusive account of the estate's valuation, the Count realised that he was now in a position to govern his feelings at will and conduct his affairs in a fashion more befitting his desires. Upon exiting his notary's chambers, finding a lawyer's practice situated on the lower floor of the building, he availed himself of the chance to stop there forthwith, that very afternoon, going down the stairs, having just officially received his inheritance.

Once he had provided his particulars and standing, he made known his resolve to file for separation proceedings

against his wife. The lawyer's first concern was to establish if any of his professional brethren had ever taken instruction from the person now seeking his services. This alone might have proved awkward: the matter of collegial proprieties. Yet with this scruple removed, the legal professional threw himself completely into Count Grommelain's vendetta, despite never having laid eyes on him before. From then on, he was willing to champion the Count's cause devotedly and steadfastly, in order to make of the Countess de Grommelain, whom he had never seen, a cornered, crushed, and breathless adversary, sentenced to pay every penny.

"Might I ask you to explain your grounds for complaint against Madame la Comtesse?"

The Count answered plainly: "Infidelity."

"Ah! My Lord Count, what a grave charge to make! I trust you'll appreciate my being more than cautious in your particular case. Such is my practice in all these matters where the Parisian elite are concerned… Surface impressions call for such extensive proof! When do you believe these improper acts first occurred?"

“They likely started, I should think, about five or six years back…”

“And it’s only now you’ve found out?”

“I’ve only now resolved to act.”

“The… forgive my bluntness!… other party is no doubt from your world?… someone you know as well?… This bears significantly on child custody arrangements: the offence and its degree of moral corruption are weighed differently based on whether the children have seen unsuitable examples… Briefly then, is the party in question, as I dearly hope is the case, someone well-known to your household, a trusted familiar, a friend from your daily life?”

“That I don’t know.”

“So it’s just suspicions you have? But surely about someone in particular?”

“No, I’m unable to specifically name anybody just now…”

“Upon what do you found your charge then?… How do you propose we go ahead?…”

“Good sir, I need not discover who my wife’s lover is to know she keeps one. I need only know what she’s like!

I charge you to furnish me with proof of the act itself, by arranging surveillance through those special individuals you no doubt use in similar matters?"

"Exactly!" confirmed the legal adviser.

"Meaning that upon official establishment of the facts, we shall learn about whoever is thus exposed... Anyway, I'm not pressed for time! By placing this matter in your hands, I must inform you that though I'm keen to proceed, I'm only reasonably so."

As he prepared to go, Grommelain offered some intelligence regarding the countess's ways and customs, the days and hours she particularly favoured for her excursions, her rather lengthy absences, her secretive pursuits elsewhere.

Having sorted this out, he simply had to get back to the conjugal dwelling just in time for the midday meal, at which he purposefully installed himself in his position as head of household and married man. To his right was positioned his firstborn son, to his left the younger, with the mother of his children seated across from him, enjoying that status of inviolability which, just recently and

with noble resignation, he had publicly granted her when addressing their sister-in-law Catherine.

Marie-Blanche brought to her husband's attention two dinner engagements that had just come through, both falling on the same evening, one from the Generaless de Clefcy-Borcq and another from

the Meuil family.

"I'm dreadfully undecided," she said, "about which to accept… It's always jollier at Jeanne's, but she does sometimes invites rather questionable sorts… On the other hand, at the General's lady's, though it's stupefyingly tedious nine-tenths of the time, one might find oneself at quite a splendid affair and perhaps cross paths with someone from the house of Guyenne!… These formal cards, I find them insufferable. There's never the remotest hint about who your fellow guests will be!… The people throwing these dinners can't seem to understand that, more often than not, one goes not to spend time with them but rather with the fellow guests they've gathered… Which do you think we should choose?"

"What date are we talking about?"

“Oh! In three weeks’ time!... I’m thinking of putting off my answer for a few days, after I’ve made some inquiries round and about?...”

“Certainly not!” Grommelain declared emphatically: “propriety comes first. Choose as you wish, but write back without delay... Personally, that far in advance, it’s all the same to me... And I’m convinced it will remain a matter of complete indifference to me!...”

In fact, when barely twelve days had slipped past, he was requested to attend the legal practice charged with conducting investigations on his behalf.

“Monsieur le Comte,” announced the lawyer, “I believe you can be well pleased. The information is in hand: it’s all we could desire. We may now initiate, in respect of Madame la Comtesse, the official proceedings that will establish our grounds for taking assured action. But... you know the old adage?... One can’t hunt two hares in one go... Indeed, I’m afraid so! You’ll have to pick one...”

“Pick one?” Grommelain muttered, tugging at his moustache as he stiffened with aristocratic pride.

“Exactly so!… The surveillance shows that Her Ladyship frequents two distinct meeting places by turns… And at each location, there’s a different party involved…”

The lawyer had produced from his papers a succession of records upon which his claims were based.

Despite Grommelain’s worldly indifference to such things, the intelligence nonetheless caused him a slight inner shock. The sensation that vexed him expressed itself internally thus: ‘Delightful, I must say! Absolutely delightful!…’ Such would have been his spoken thoughts, had this exchange been with a family connection, someone close, or someone of his station; and his gift for irony could not stretch any further. But in the presence of one he deemed a lesser, he would not deign to speak his mind. His features restricted themselves to haughtily implying that the Countess de Grommelain was mistress of her own affairs, and that if her arrangements involved two gallants at the same time, then plainly she had her own reasons of social necessity that made them indispensable.

“Would you mind telling me,” said the husband, “who exactly these men might be?”

The lawyer checked his notes:

“Ah yes! To begin with, there’s someone who occupies a little flat just round the corner from you, Count, in quite a proper establishment… That’s right, only a short walk from your residence… Your wife has her meetings there with a man of soldierly bearing who goes by the name of… who’s called… Now where is it… I do remember that on their second meeting he was tracked all the way to his lodgings… Ah yes, that’s it: he’s called Monsieur d’Iancey.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake!” Grommelain burst out… But he’s only three months into his marriage!”

The lawyer’s gesture indicated he found it regrettable, but stood by the information.

“And the other one?” Grommelain pressed on.

“That’s one Monsieur de Forléans, who shares lodgings with his mother… Madame la Comtesse comes to him at a perfectly unremarkable furnished hotel in the rue de l’Étoile…”

As if making amends for having highlighted such an ungracious detail regarding the Count’s wife, the legal man offered apologetically:

"You see… a mere youngster, really?… The young man couldn't have run to the expense of proper rooms… And after all, from the look of things, it could simply be a trifling affair?…"

The legal official twiddled his fingers, describing invisible wisps of smoke wherein, he plainly thought, such passing fancies of highborn ladies ought to vanish without trace!

Of the two gentlemen pointed out to him, the husband knew immediately which to pursue. Where d'Iancey was concerned, there were multiple grounds for taking no action. Not merely because the contemplated revenge could, by challenging a brilliant military man, result in some foolish affair of honour. A motive Grommelain preferred to consider more decisive was the worldly respectability of his well-established connection with Roger. What is more, the man was not only married, but had also, by virtue of his union, allied himself with a family whose constant devotion to the proper cause ought not to be disrupted by any unseemly affair. Such a thing might have been most unfavourably viewed, particularly amongst the Gisors. And besides, Grommelain was con-

nected by fairly extensive cousinship to that circle of the Laterrencoux, Vaudemonts, and the like. Quite differently, Lionel de Forléans was just some negligible upstart in Parisian circles. His mother maintained a salon of absolutely no importance. His relations were simply small-time gentry from Saintonge. Granted, if pressed, one could find a bit of family tie between the Forléans and Grommelain lines. For if aristocrats are quickest to dispute that all men are brethren, one can still note that, due to their formal obsession with degrees of connection, they all end up related somehow. Yet in this particular case, the link went merely through some inconsequential Forléans female to a hard-up Grommelain, who was deemed to have left the family fold when, maintaining his government post, he had accepted a treasury position instead of remaining at least a keeper of the royal hunt.

All that remained was for the lawyer to set out, with some final particulars, the precise circumstances for catching red-handed the one of the two transgressors whose peace of mind Grommelain felt least obliged to preserve. And he dispatched his client to the proper police commissary, who held himself in readiness to take

official action the moment a state of affairs suitable for magisterial intervention was reported.

So it came about that, two days hence at nightfall, the transgressors unexpectedly witnessed justice entering their haven without disturbance, made possible by the master keys of the hotel valet pressed into service for the purpose…

When formally called upon to do so, the Count de Grommelain readily confirmed there was no error, and that those in attendance were certainly facing the mother of his children. A legal record was instantly prepared, by the brightness of a glowing log fire which—filtering through curtains clumsily pulled together by shaking hands—illuminated the guilty forms as well.

The moment their visitors had taken their leave and given them back their privacy, Marie-Blanche's first thought was to dispatch Lionel, seeing him there all wretched, incapable of any serious thought, and hopelessly inadequate for what had transpired between the grown-ups. She bundled him off roughly, speedily, out!—all the while speaking out loud to herself alone… And the youngster made his swift escape, suffering one more blow

—possibly more disturbing than all that came before—after hearing his companion voice such language as he believed no woman could ever say or even be aware of. He left bearing only a timid memory of that beautiful mouth, not long ago so sweetly gracious, now unforgettably disfigured by the horrid things she expelled about her husband, issuing forth like a tangle of vipers, like scum from the gutters.

Having no warning signs, the bolt-from-the-blue quality of the disaster had heightened the paralysing effect on Marie-Blanche. However, in a woman so mentally unhinged, so wrecked by bodily overexertion, so wildly habituated to indulging her every whim, the first sentiment to emerge was a mad rage of hatred. Rather than consider that Grommelain's resolute move was just the opening to continued proceedings, she could only obsess over schemes of frenzied vengeance. A single idea, more than any other, knocked about inside her small head, as her dishevelled chestnut hair refused to submit to the hat she frenziedly sought to pin down: there absolutely must be some legal means, some devastating payback against a spouse who had had the villainy to take his wife red-

handed. By heaven! It was inconceivable that the law had established nothing, had foreseen nothing for so natural, so essential a moral requirement for retribution!

Having left the furnished rooms, under the bite of the street's chill, Marie-Blanche became more aware of her predicament. She saw the shame, the unfeasibility of going back to her house, where she pictured Grommelain serenely returned and possibly having her cast out from the very house that had been part of her marriage portion!... Now that she thought about it, the police commissioner was doubtless keeping watch there round the clock? Why ever not, in fact? Had not he achieved the greatest familiarity with a husband who had just revealed his wife in her unmentionables?...

Just then a thought presented itself, electrifying her like a masterstroke of inspiration. She must fly to her father's house, seek his aid, call upon that considerable mind and the fierce animosity she knew he bore against Count Grommelain. Oh! Of course! A man must be deployed—and a man of Baron Saffre's standing!—against this husband who had not been ashamed to league with a

police official against a woman and scarcely more than a child!…

With fists squeezed shut, throat burning, her purple eyes obscured by their own lightning bolts of fury, she was oblivious to the vacant conveyances rolling past, any of which she could have boarded to relieve her urgency… Controlling her racing pulse, she ran then walked by turns at a vertiginous rate. She quickly gained the Avenue du Cortège, rang, rang again and pealed the bell inside three seconds, and only caught her breath once in the Saffre mansion's entrance hall, after learning her father was there.

Yet she had turned up at a most inconvenient hour. The Baron was in no temper to devote his time to anyone whatsoever. He was due to depart at first light the following morning for London; and between now and then, he had enough work to keep him up all night. During such periods of reflection and feverish analysis, his every feeling was devoted to the columns of numbers lined up in his head. The huge columns of his intricate calculations layered themselves, then scaled each other, colliding with those running counter. And at times, with awful collisions

in his brain, it all toppled over in a mental grimoire and an ant-like crawling of black symbols.

Hence, upon his daughter's arrival, their eyes met with the same look of arriving from God knows where, of emerging from the unimaginable.

Marie-Blanche hurried forward in distress through the baron's forbidding office, dominated by its monumental hearth. Swaying snake-like, she thrust her fine head up from her hastily-fastened astrakhan collar, waving her tiny muff about like some swollen, intimidating boxer's mitt.

"Father," she began, "I've come seeking your help… Please protect me, I'm begging you… Save me from my husband. You're well aware of his nature! I cannot possibly continue living with him!"

"Whatever has happened?" questioned Saffre, his mind elsewhere.

"Oh! Trivialities!… But I can't tolerate it any more!… Up to this point," she intimated with a disingenuous softening of tone, "I'd chosen not to bother you with lamentations about the life I've been made to lead… Still, patience has its bounds. I'm at the end of my tether. I

must be freed from this slavery. And my sole hope rests in your wholehearted backing and compassion!"

Saffre kept his thoughts fixed on his own affairs, perceiving his daughter's complaints through a fog of distraction.

"Why exactly?" he responded.

"To request my divorce."

"Ah! Out of the question! Never shall I help you commit such an outstanding act of stupidity."

Marie-Blanche bit down on her lip angrily. She knew that making her father retract his words was all but impossible; and she already despised him for reaching his verdict so hastily.

"What's to become of me," she uttered with an acid whisper, "if you're the first to turn your back on me?"

Her father gave a shrug, protesting:

"What case could you bring against your husband?"

"Any reasons will do!... His temperament!... My maid is prepared to give evidence... To begin with, my husband has ignored me for several years. That constitutes an offence, doesn't it?... And if he has the gall to reply, every-

one will undoubtedly cry out against him! He's the most terrible ill-mannered brute!"

Saffre shook his head dismissively and retorted:

"The beau monde is indifferent to whatever faults married couples may find in each other. But there's one sin it never forgives them, a single one: divorcing!... Often enough, the husband's a rogue, the wife's a hussy, and the world isn't the least bit scandalised, since rogue and hussy make a household; which is the template for worldly functions, falls within the norm, and makes a properly dressed union. Hear me well, my child: lone women are not in fashion. In the pageant of fashionable life, a woman doesn't count, cannot be displayed except paired with a husband... But see instead the undignified situation they've forced upon Madame de Cridzieux after her divorce, despite her being entirely blameless! And the Baroness Ambré-Guelly... who's practically irreproachable... At any rate, she's thereabouts!" he determined with gentlemanly discretion, unwilling to declare himself more than partially on matters which etiquette insists one not see and yet permits one to credit.

"But equally, we have ladies at whose salons one encounters the Coucys, the Gisors, the Beaujolais, all the Epernons under the sun, and who, it appears to me, manage perfectly well without their husbands?..."

"Of course! You're likely about to name, for one, a woman who was a viceroy's wife and who, after parting from her lord, took back her name from the old French nobility!... Naturally, the most sacrosanct principles don't apply to her... And what's more, a divorce obtained in England!... That's an elite case, whitewashed in London... But mark my words, had she not kept control of two million in rents... yes, were she living with a small retinue, one must wonder what deference she would be shown?... I'm telling you once more: there's a single part for a woman to play, and that's to keep her marriage intact. Within that framework, she's free to commit any act, descend from wrong to worse, requiring not that she genuinely conceals it, but simply that she affects to conceal it. People are well aware that no one is immune to the universal failings of nature. We simply make believe we don't see our neighbour's affairs, so long as they refrain from flaunting them... The unique concern of high society is to

be held accountable only indirectly for the women it admits. It underwrites every one of them, provided they come with a husband as primary underwriter. Of him, nothing more is asked than to bear gracefully whatever is seen to happen to him, to suffer what remains unknown, and never to upset with infantile complaints the subtle harmony, the private domain of good company…

Marie-Blanche's whole body betrayed her mounting impatience. Only with anxious tics did she attend to the verbose arguments through which Baron Saffre, clearly enjoying the sound of his own voice, refused his daughter the help she knew her whole destiny hung upon. For his part, the baron had hit his stride now; a speechmaker who could not bear to be checked mid-flow.

"Just examine the company we keep, look at all our connections! Look round this world of ours, comprised solely of people who count, ranked amongst the most distinguished and elegant, chased after for the gatherings they host and those eager to have them… Look, weigh up, do the sums; and see if more than half these worldly women would be accepted if marriage were not their only passport to a clique where no one's admitted without

someone to vouch for them… And make no mistake, it's being married that counts, not who you're married to!… The man himself might be the worst blackguard imaginable. It's not through any consideration for the husbands that doubtful women gain entrée—the men are immediately written off as simpletons or abjectly permissive… No! The institution alone, marriage in the abstract, surviving intact through all the muck, with its shifting catalogue of lovers, some kept, some not—that's the passport, the shield, the sacred protection!… I ask you! If a husband weren't their calling card, do you suppose anyone would welcome Baroness Riffenillier and Madame de Lizure, who are nonetheless on everyone's invitation list? And what of Madame de Byrax, whose fashion bills are famously settled by Icheuldorff?… Don't forget Madame de Mulleville?… And Madame Seygre-Ronne? Then there's that tart the Marquise de Ringemont, with whom we dined at yours two evenings ago, blatantly scheming to rob little Wien of the first lover she's shown any real attachment to!… And Madame Jildriny?… And Madame de Caystrun?…"

“And Madame d’Exireuil?” Marie-Blanche shot back, her patience wearing visibly thin.

“Well,” the baron countered with cold superiority, “to my knowledge, that particular lady is above reproach.”

Marie-Blanche said nothing, dropping her head in surly opposition, prepared to do battle. Pushed in this way, Saffre’s tone grew razor-sharp.

“I trust I’ve made myself clear. I’m demanding you give up this completely absurd plan… And rest assured, you’ll get no backing from me whatsoever… Far from it!”

“Oh!” burst out Marie-Blanche, completely distraught, “you can’t possibly mean to reject me like this?”

And she moved to grip her father’s hands with her slender, icy fingers… Yet she had injured his pride… He rose from his seat, moved away, kept clear of her, pronouncing:

“We’re done here!… Let me be. I need to think about an issue that, let me tell you, requires more of me than your tedious dramatics… If perchance these ideas remain with you, you can always return for another talking-to, some time in the future… in half a year. Let me make it clear that my position will remain the same.”

Everything in his manner and voice suggested his daughter should be thinking about leaving. But it is hard to suggest someone should leave when they have not a clue where to go next.

It was then that the Baroness Saffre walked into her husband's study. She had become anxious —punctuality being amongst her most pressing concerns—about the baron's tardiness in announcing himself ready to dine. She said hello to her daughter, carefully avoiding any show of surprise at discovering her there. Using the airy discretion that always helped her fade into the background, she swiftly became an almost undetectable presence in the room.

Marie-Blanche, even in her disordered state of mind, did not deceive herself that the baroness could provide the slightest practical help or moral comfort. But she was at once encouraged by no longer being isolated with her father, and by having near her, if not a mother's aid, at least a woman's company…

At the same time, threads of thought were beginning to unravel the reason the Count de Grommelain had challenged her so directly… The truth finally struck her that if

he had embarked on judicial action, he meant to see it through completely, doubtless to the utmost extremes of what the law allowed…

Therefore, compelled to disclose at least part of the truth, she squarely faced up to her father's censure, telling him:

"What if I had no other goal in pursuing legal action against my husband than to deny him the upper hand of filing suit first?… Under those conditions, would you actually still expect me to untangle this mess by myself? …"

Saffre's forehead creased with displeasure. Now that he had grasped what was really happening, he retorted gruffly:

"Marie-Blanche, drop the lies!… Confess that you've done something your husband has seized upon to attack you?…"

The young woman looked aside whilst keeping her chin up.

"Have it your way!" Saffre went on, "I won't take back a word of what's been said. There's only one way forward

for you: to win his forgiveness, even should you need to plead for it on bended knee for your children's sake!..."

"I'd rather die!" she declared vehemently.

"I see... you hopeless blunderer!... you've managed to get yourself exposed!... That's disgusting, and pathetic!... The Almighty knows you weren't burdened with a difficult husband!... Still, you couldn't help yourself until your actions practically leapt out at him! After all, you kept giving the game away every single day through what you said, how you dressed, through all those shifts in your ways!... Speaking for myself, I've been guessing, picking up on things for months now..."

"Whatever do you mean?" she challenged impudently.

"Oh, please! A father isn't half as naive as a husband! ... Of late, you've seemed like a woman about to go off the rails, just watching for the moment... to throw respectability out the window!..."

A glint of scornful wickedness lit up Marie-Blanche's pupils. She had nearly been tempted to scoff, learning that through six years of dissolute life, she had outwitted this master puppeteer, this deep reader of situations known as Baron Saffre! And she held at the corner of her

lips a bitter sneer in which twisted the memories of those long years of trysts, with their dubious delights and constant rotation of men: it was the mark of lassitude from all those kisses given to all those men, whom she had never favoured above a host of others who had remained strangers to her bed.

"You reckoned," Saffre thundered, "you need only show up here for me to handle cleaning up your messes! … Think again… I'm currently convinced all the fault lies with you, as you didn't dispute it when I said as much… Hence, you're in your husband's hands. I won't challenge his use of his rightful authority!… Besides which, I refuse to demean myself to that fellow by soliciting pardon for someone who's guilty!…"

"I never imagined," Marie-Blanche rejoined cunningly "you'd become such a stickler for virtue!"

And by her glance, she hunted across her mother's face for any indication, albeit mute, of acknowledgement she thought her venomous delivery had merited. However, Baroness Saffre stayed utterly still, dissolving her features into a bland pallidity.

Amid a droning in her mind, Marie-Blanche sensed events whirling around her as though mighty arms were shoving her away from every angle. She was left with only a bizarre need to wound, the self-preservation reflex of a cornered wasp that hurls itself at threats and stings at random.

She resumed bitterly:

“If being your daughter, your troubled daughter at that, earns me no consideration, then you should certainly show exceptional understanding for anybody’s lapses!...”

“Excuse me?”

“What I mean is that none of us is blameless!... that anyone observing others is likewise being observed!... and you would have shown better justice by being less severe!...”

Saffre squared up to Marie-Blanche, the intimidating expanse of his forehead looming over her:

“Spare me the cryptic tales!... Get to the point completely, if you have it in you to be sincere?”

This colossus of arrogance and despotism quivered with barely contained fury. Never before had he known

the experience of being challenged directly… He ought not to have goaded Marie-Blanche into such defiance!… But could he possibly have known how much madness, accumulated through every excess of her wild life, had unnaturally mingled in his daughter's blood with the gambling spirit and defiant nature she had inherited from him?…

Not a muscle moved, not a fraction did she give way.

"Shall I list by name the women you've held up as models to me, right here in this house, ever since I was old enough to know their purpose, through your fawning attention… and the price you paid for their favours!…" she concluded with a bitter laugh.

"Marie-Blanche, please!" the Baroness Saffre whispered, "my dear!… You're forgetting I'm in the room! …"

Countess de Grommelain looked towards her mother with a face gone mad. Her mother was making pathetically timid gestures, pleading for an end to these deplorable exchanges from which such noxious melancholy arose. "Come now," her mother's whole attitude seemed to express, "can't you see how I've understood my wifely

duties? Haven't I, as the one most directly concerned, forever closed my eyes to your father's doings?... Besides, what are all these woes worth, next to the matter of keeping well or ill?..."

The Baron, trembling with outrage and driven wild by the affront, moved towards his daughter and grabbed her roughly by the shoulders. The two sets of eyes struck against each other, besotted with utter wrath perhaps more than with the animosity that had flared up between them. It was as if their every torment, all the grievances they had amassed against other people and existence itself, had burst forth through this single breach all at once. What transpired between the paternal and filial gaze contained an uncanny quality. Within lay the suppressed madness of souls poisoned—hers by the unconfessed narcotics lending colour to the fitful monotony of her orgies, his by the ink of accounts and occult signatures wherein he observed his gold, cut stone and the mighty summits of his riches disappear...

"Get out!" shouted Saffre, "you're a brazen and unruly daughter!... a woman beyond redemption!... From this

moment you're a stranger to me, take yourself wherever you want, I cast you out!..."

And addressing his wife, who had come forward a little with arms upraised to the heavens, he said:

"Please, let me defend your honour and mine alike... Don't come between us... I won't listen to another word! ..."

The Baroness, kept in check by her husband's stern words, whose gift for making millions she worshipped, managed only to whisper in her daughter's ear:

"If going back to your house right now is too hard, spend some days at your brother's or sister's place..."

...Out in the street again—having been quite literally thrown out—Marie-Blanche headed nowhere in particular, swaying unsteadily... The whole of what lay ahead seemed to have slammed shut before her mind... Most painfully, she felt barred from those forthcoming social occasions, publicised and agreed upon, for which she had so exquisitely readied herself. The show was going dark. Yes, it was closing night! Gone were the nights when Marie-Blanche would reign as a minor royalty among her zealous followers! Done with, those parties of refinement,

pleasure and petty pride, whose invitations she pictured in a burst of recollection, lined up against her boudoir looking-glass!... So what was she to do? Must she send her regrets immediately for all of it? Or just be missing when the hour struck? Quite the conundrum!... And burning, rapid tears rolled down her cheeks as she recalled that precious, gorgeous apricot satin gown she had been fitted for mere hours previously... So much for all that frantic effort to get the gown finished for the dinner at Madame de Clefcy-Borcq's, which was apparently being thrown for an Infanta!...

The next instant, though, her tears were scorched dry by the savage intensity of an unexpected feeling that gripped her. The greater part of those women, whose vile behaviour the Baron had just hinted at... they would be at that reception, crowding round the royal princess with their pleased flattery, their victorious charm, their revolting self-possession!... So all would continue unchanged for all those women who, granted, were worth far less than she, a hundredfold less, maybe a thousandfold, but who had the unwarranted blessing of not yet knowing

this mortifying shock, this stripped-bare wretchedness of being caught in flagrante!…

No, this was not right—it defied all justice that those women should carry on with their untroubled mirth and lofty manners whilst Marie-Blanche—wretched, forsaken Marie-Blanche—drifted through the desolate boulevard in the evening chill, weeping for herself and knowing with every fibre of her being that she was desperate, disgraced, and banished from society!

The light from a post office lamp, only a few steps off, held out its call—muffled and treacherous. Marie-Blanche approached it with mechanical directness, like a machine thrown into gear that veers disastrously off course. She requested telegraph forms, ‘little blue ones’ as she put it, for whatever sum spilled into her hand when she turned her purse inside out. She obtained five with this.

And so, with the broad strokes of block capitals she expertly wielded to disguise her hand, she let one man know that if diamonds were absent from his wife’s person, rumour had it the tenor Aquilini was to blame; to a different man she penned that his wife would do well to use what youth she had left to replace that halfwit vis-

count she had thoroughly ruined at last; to yet another, she supplied the address of the 'little love nest' in rue de Balzac where his wife's infidelity played out by the day. Marie-Blanche had this on good authority, the adulteress herself having confided in her. Another still received the name of the man everyone knew to be the real father of the recent baby girl he had been presented with…

She had penned and enclosed them all as they came, not once pausing for air, yielding to inspired frenzy…

She had one 'blue' to go.

Who should receive this last one?… Heaven knows there was no shortage of such gossip to share!… Saffre himself, only moments ago, had flagged up countless others worthy of such treatment! Who might that be, in fact? … Who deserved it most, since only one form was left… Yes, whom did she most want to wound this instant?…

Not yet decided on the addressee, she opened with these words:

"As a cuckold, you're the laughing stock of Paris…"

This pronouncement of Paris's judgement was indeed universal enough to apply to anyone, whether the most upright citizen or the most worthless wretch.

"Your closest companion is the very man bedding your wife," she went on…

Again, she was keeping to the most widespread of generalisations… Marie-Blanche, no closer to a decision, busied herself ornamenting the stems of her capitals. What she wrote next, set down without thinking, became rather more pointed:

"Your dim-witted look aside, you're reputed to be a kept man…"

This last term proved a stroke of inspiration. The recipient's identity, so far undetermined, thus presented itself. Marie-Blanche filled in Jacques d'Exireuil's address on the form; and joining it to the rest, she dropped the entire venomous parcel into the postbox.

Having finished this piece of work, she found herself out on the pavement again… But an enigmatic something had taken hold of her entire self, steering her movements, controlling her will, pulling at her limbs as though she were a puppet on strings. It happened because time had worn on, long past the accustomed hour when the young woman's addiction commanded its nightly 'stings'. The most despotic habit to which this creature was in thrall

now clamoured within her with violent urgency, wracking her with that agony called the state of want.

At this point, she could see glittering in her mind the golden shimmer of that small implement of rapture, that plaything of torment, whose employment alone now gave her back a measure of stability and a kind of personhood. Through all her wild divagations, it was this compulsion that led her back to her own doorstep. She had trailed the vision that danced before her sight, virtually enticing her hand to clutch at it… Suddenly she stood before her mansion, she rang the bell, passed inside unhindered and made for her apartments, led through the shadows of her actions only by the phantom star of that deathly Eden.

Morphine intoxication had substituted itself for everything within her, assuming matrimonial power, fatherly authority, and the office of her own conscience. It was under this bewitchment's rule that in less than two hours she had swooned like a bacchante and raged like a Fury, becoming by turns her own destruction and that of others… maybe even, on top of everything, guilty of unwitting parricide!… She gave it no thought, but the die was cast all the same, come what may!… Always it was

this sorcery injected into her enchanting, demon-ridden flesh that caused her to gasp and moan as she groped about her chaotic drawers and over her fevered skin… And in the end, it was this that now let her muscles ease, rouged her cheeks with pink contentment and, for a fleeting while, laid upon her defiled lips the smile of a little girl!…

Marie-Blanche had barely returned when her mother arrived at the house asking to be shown in to the Count de Grommelain. After weighing his options, Baron Saffre had ultimately decided his wife should try her hand at mending fences between husband and wife.

The Count, newspaper in hand in his smoking room, was taking pleasure in perusing the assorted news items from a day that had the interesting peculiarity of having been, where he was concerned, a singularly busy day. He showed gracious promptness in admitting his mother-in-law.

She started off in her most reedy tones, with the tremulous movements she used to signal her frail state of health, with an unspoken plea not to aggravate it:

"My being out of doors at this time of day, dear friend, tells you more than words could about how profoundly upset I am."

Grommelain nodded respectfully and said:

"So you've been told about what took place today?"

"Oh!" the Baroness Saffre exclaimed, promptly thrusting her hands out to prevent any painful explanations reaching her, "I've no wish to hear specifics... Don't tell me anything! Don't, I beg you, disturb my peace with needless details. I'm willing to assume all the fault lies with Marie-Blanche!... After all, the hapless girl is if anything too forthright; and she certainly didn't put her best foot forward in the lamentable exchange she's unfortunately just had with her father... My only purpose here is to appeal to the kindness of your heart..."

"By my faith! Should your daughter be wise enough not to put up a fight, you have my promise to treat her with all possible restraint. I'll confine myself to the strictly needful charges. I'm well aware she bore me two boys. But let her oppose me, let her attempt the tiniest slur on my character, and I'll see her name in the gutter...

No measure's too extreme when it comes to winning these proceedings…"

"Court proceedings!" the Baroness cried in dismay… Please! Dear fellow, it's unthinkable that you'd carry things to such lengths?"

"My lady, it's been roughly six years that my wife has cheated on me with barely a break. Whatever the case, for five years I've been sure, known it for an absolute fact, and stood by wordlessly while it happened…"

In this avowal, Baroness Saffre perceived only what could argue for repairing the marriage:

"Well, seeing as you've summoned the fortitude to suffer this indignity all these years, the worst is behind you… Here, as elsewhere, aren't the early days invariably the most trying?"

Grommelain thought it unnecessary to justify his position on this question. He was well aware that his loathing of the betrayal had never lessened. To put up with such a position, he had been forced to tell himself again and again that his fortune would not stretch to righteous anger. At present, with decent wealth to his name, no argument seemed sufficient to prevent him divorcing his

faithless wife. His scruples required him to restore her marriage portion, proving thereby that money holds no sway over a man of integrity once he no longer needs it.

Baroness Saffre felt wretched at the wall of silence her son-in-law had so pointedly erected around himself. She found herself wanting in that combination of zeal and energy one needs to fight for a cause, to keep at it, to lean hard and even beseech an opponent to shift their ground.

“This will create an appalling scandal!” she said under her breath.

Grommelain responded with steely resolve:

“I shan’t be the one to blame for it!…”

For some minutes his mother-in-law too grew quiet, seized by a kind of suffocation which, in her case, made for neither a painful nor embarrassing spectacle, nor even an indecorous one to put on in polite circles. There was a temperance and finesse to it, like well-bred sighing. Grommelain involved himself in this episode, for which he could reasonably be held responsible, to exactly the extent that was fitting. His eyes, tracking the restoration of the baroness’s breathing, showed the same civil attent-

iveness he would have displayed watching a cigar he had provided to a guest that appeared to have gone out.

Finally the baroness, having succeeded in collecting herself a bit, made one last attempt.

“I know only too well,” she picked up again, “that certain practical matters must perforce be set aside at times like these when tragic questions of the heart have progressed to splitting up a marriage!… Still, have you sufficiently pondered what it means, my dear man, to separate from Marie-Blanche? Remember you’re cutting yourself off as well from all that the Baron Saffre’s family signifies for your position, from now on… and most especially in times to come?…”

And she coughed in expiring fashion, as if to render immediately tangible what had hitherto been drawn only in distant perspective.

“I confess myself at a loss, madam,” replied Grommelain with stately composure… I cannot imagine what you would have me perceive in these remarks you honour me with.”

“Oh, but surely! What I’m suggesting deserves to rank above almost all else, as you and Marie-Blanche approach

that certain time of life! Rather than indulge in these trifling vexations, wouldn't you do better to consider the encouraging tomorrow... I might even venture, without vanity: the remarkably glittering tomorrow reserved for you? Haven't you every reason to expect the finest rewards imaginable from my husband and myself? Really now, my dear chap, give it a few years and you'll definitely be past these fits of illusory indignation, in which one would be dreadfully unwise to give up the most worthwhile actualities! Think how you'd inevitably reproach yourself for abandoning everything to resentments... which you may quite possibly be warranted in accepting! However, such resentments, though we may call them the worst afflictions of marriage, they're the quickest to become bygones... they cannot last longer than a woman's bloom!"

She had brought all her poignant fragility to bear on these intimations and unspoken meanings. Even as she spoke, she was privately resolving that this ultimate effort would be her last. Yes, five minutes more and she would put an end to getting winded, to wearing herself out, to the growing numbness in her limbs, for throughout her

speech, it was her own discomforts she was listening to above all else.

Her son-in-law, however, for all his apparent unconcern, had grown irritated by the self-important manner she had assumed as she paraded Marie-Blanche's 'expectations' of inheritance like a lure, with a slowness both coquettish and touchingly simple-minded.

"Oh please," he responded, "if I were pinning my hopes on Baron Saffre's inheritance to recoup my disappointments, I'd come up rather short!"

The Baroness made a little pout that meant: "Well I never! You're terribly fussy!"

Grommelain had thus far held back from raising a subject he knew rather too much about. Set on cutting all links with his father-in-law's dealings, he had been keen to escape the indelicacy of appearing to meddle in them still, if only verbally. Not least because, being aware his father-in-law was sinking fast, he wanted to forestall any distasteful analogy between his actions and those of rats deserting the ship… However, his mother-in-law's changed manner had brought him to the end of his tether. He steeled himself to unleash some unwelcome

news upon the supreme confidence she nursed regarding her husband's flawless handling of affairs.

"Madame," he pronounced, "as things stand, Baron Saffre's fortune is damaged beyond repair."

Jolted as if by an electric shock, she answered on this occasion with dawning assertiveness:

"What kind of jest is this supposed to be?"

"I assure you, madame, this is no laughing matter! With his business going as it is, your husband will presently face absolute ruin. It's only months away now… perhaps no more than weeks…"

The Baroness Saffre was no longer herself. On hearing her son-in-law—this composed, formal gentleman who chose his words carefully—declare himself in such explicit fashion, she was certain his facts were sound.

"Well then!" she pressed eagerly, "speak plainly!"

Without thinking, she slipped the mantilla down, letting it settle around her shoulders. That unpretentious wrap, hastily arranged over her hair as she had climbed into the carriage, had sat utterly unmoved upon her forehead since she had come in. But from then onwards, she

transformed into pure alertness. This marked the point at which she planted herself firmly in the dialogue.

Grommelain consented to open up to whatever degree his constitutional reserve would permit.

"I wouldn't presume," he began, "nor would I know how to get into the technical aspects. All I can tell you of the venture to which your husband will owe his ruin is that though it started out grand, it quickly transformed into sheer recklessness… Of course, to tear away such wealth from so relentless a combatant would have needed a fearsome grinding wheel!… Yet in this age of ours, you've no doubt heard repeatedly of disasters every bit as vast!… As we speak, Madame, your husband is battling the markets on every exchange worldwide, from New York all the way to Berlin. Those who had partnered in his luck have all fallen—every last one. Baron Saffre's exceptional resources alone keep him afloat; but he's about to go under—his time is up!…"

Something truly miraculous, a marvellous cure was working itself through every fibre of the Baroness. Her gaze brightened, her face grew animated, the roses returned to her complexion.

"Can you be quite sure," she demanded with vigour, "that your intelligence is correct?..."

"Beyond doubt!"

However, she had plenty of stamina left for pushing on this point. She was all restlessness; her thoughts flashed instantly, her queries came faster still:

"Might you explain how you were informed of this?"

"From a most trustworthy source."

"Has word of this spread publicly yet, do you suppose?"

"I shouldn't imagine so..."

"My informant, who was perfectly placed to know, is not at all loose-lipped; they simply believed they owed me this as a matter of good fellowship..."

"Was Arthur told, and my other son-in-law—were they informed by this person?"

"No!" came his contemptuous response.

"So! A friend of your own, is it... nobody else's?"

The Count de Grommelain made clear, in his most patrician manner:

"Simply an acquaintance, though our families have been connected for generations..."

The Baroness steered the conversation elsewhere. No vestige survived of that air of detachment and lethargy in which everyone had always known her to dwell… She had planted her elbows on a side table with bold familiarity. And a pair of her fingers, set at a sharp angle, made a strong little pitchfork—nails and all—to brace her chin.

“Listen,” she remarked energetically, “I’m not about to quietly allow such a disaster to occur?… My friend, I entreat you from the depths of my soul, as father to my grandchildren, as the son you truly are to me… before God’s law and man’s!… Do help me!… Show me what’s to be done?…”

“My word! That’s a sensitive issue… The most suitable course, as I see it, for settling family affairs is to turn them over to legal counsel… See your family lawyer. Doubtless he’s informed about a good many matters… The Baron Saffre has no doubt got you to sign things on many occasions?…”

“Oh! Hardly ever!… That would have made me suspicious!” she answered with the softest voice.

"Well now, make haste!... Perhaps there's still time to save a fair amount... maybe even a hefty chunk, who can tell?"

"My husband's leaving tomorrow morning for two days... By the time he's back, my plans will be set, I won't have neglected anything, and I'll have done what's needed!..."

She had got to her feet, graceful, brisk, and game for everything. She seized Grommelain's hands in both of hers and clasped them fondly. She bade farewell without the slightest mention of Marie-Blanche having returned to their conversation; she took off, breathing words of thanks, sparked into life by the agitation, restored by the healthy encouragement she had just been given. As she was being walked to the entrance steps by her son-in-law in silence, her sense of owing herself a social obligation gave her something close to the majestic air of one risen from the dead. A single thought finally transformed her: the necessity of preserving this ancient opulence which she must have always unconsciously loved, sprawling around her and warm in its density, so her own life,

seemingly without wants, could savour a little haven… ever so little… at its heart.

VIII

JACQUES D'EXIREUIL

GISELLE, A LITTLE OUT of sorts, had excused herself from the meal to recline on her bedroom's daybed. A bit wan, she was still perfectly beautiful in her cerulean velvet robe, whose plush fur trim nestled high about her neck. Occasionally she coughed rather badly; but in the end, it was simply a touch of flu. She believed she had come down with it either at the Comédie-Française in Saffre's box, or during Didi de Mulleville's dinner gathering, though it might have been at the café-concert they had attended—in company with the Bréhands, various other men, and as always Baron Saffre—to listen to Fichette Lanlaire perform. Indeed, Madame d'Exireuil had long been devising every imaginable plan to curtail the number of evenings

passed in her husband's sole company. Formerly, she had manoeuvred to the contrary, seeking to snatch every possible hour from social life and keep them for the unfolding sweetness of intimacy and cosy dialogues together. Still, that beloved habit was gone now, smothered in the very depths of her heart.

On this occasion of unwanted solitude à deux, Giselle had taken refuge in reading. A light, perched atop a lengthy stem, flooded her with the finest illumination, tumbling from so far up, gently caught by an expansive white lampshade. Thus did the young woman evade connubial exchanges, which had grown to be her torment. Her liveliness had given way to silence; and she suffered under that inexorable rule by which individuals feel they have nothing to express to each other, when they can no longer express everything.

Jacques d'Exireuil too had no wish to speak, losing himself in musings about a weighty concern he was in no hurry to inflict upon his wife… He had lately had occasion to see for himself that Saffre's riches were under threat of spectacular ruin. True to the loyalties of class companionship, he had deemed it a matter of social etiquette to give

Count de Grommelain advance warning. However, that duty discharged, he was left simply wrestling with the force of his own pessimism. His continual presence had recently let him observe how the financial magnate to whom he was attached went about his battles. By dint of absorbing his shameless doctrines about folk and affairs, Jacques had almost persuaded himself that the impossible must be the great baron's ace in the hole. He hoped for miracles from the last-ditch measures that would surely dawn upon the man whom, nodding knowingly and with deferential familiarity, he called "the old fellow" when only Giselle was about to listen... and feel compelled to be amused.

Jacques, amid his musings, kept himself supported against the fireplace, with his hands crossed low behind him. With his well-proportioned, soldierly features, he struck that thoroughly masculine pose, that style of warming up where men—should they not promptly begin holding forth—at the very least affect an air of having earned their place at such a post.

Just then, the manservant came in and left again, having delivered to M. d'Exireuil a wire on a small silver salver.

The latter, with leisurely indifference, ripped open the dotted edge.

"What's this then?" Giselle wanted to know, lifting her eyes from the page.

As Jacques scanned the contents of the telegram, all he could do was let his eyes grow round with shock.

"Nothing important!" he said. "Complete idiocy!"

"Urgent idiocy, at any rate, since they thought it worth cabling!"

The blue slip was now crushed in his fist. What mattered most was getting rid of the thing, to avoid having to deny her knowledge of it. Jacques hurled the dispatch at the burning wood, only for it to ricochet onto the rug. He hastily grabbed it with the fire irons and forced it down, entombing it in the depths of the fire.

"Well, aren't you acting oddly!" observed Giselle, having followed the whole charade. "What's all this secrecy about?"

She put on an air of amusement. Yet whenever something even faintly out of the ordinary happened round her, her nervous oversensitivity at once erected it into a riddle to be solved.

"Shh!" Jacques replied. "It had something revolting in it. I've burned the thing!"

Giselle pressed no further. She assumed the posture of an eager reader, nestling her shoulders into the back of her seat as her hands met to balance the weight of her tome. Her eyes seemed to fasten themselves studiously upon the absorbing narrative… Yet behind a haze of preoccupation, she perceived neither the soul nor the face of the words; they had become, in that instant, merely indifferent black strokes with no living meaning.

Her husband, jolted by indignation into sharper thought than was his habit, galvanised by the acrid sting of futile rage and shapeless resentment, was drowning in conjecture over who could have sent such a despicable letter. To begin with, nobody he knew appeared capable of stooping to such baseness… And elsewhere, he had no adversaries that he knew of. He could not discern so much as a shred of cause for enmity with a single soul…

Still, the deed was there, incontrovertible: a gesture of toxic spite had been aimed squarely at Jacques. And he still felt the strain in his clenched fingers from holding, only an instant before, proof positive that somebody bore him the nastiest ill will!… A hypothesis that struck him as perfectly possible was that he might have been, though completely oblivious to it, kindling jealousies for the better part of several months?… Why, of course! It stood to reason he had thwarted certain ambitions, interfered with people's machinations, derailed someone's carefully laid plans, by taking up a position… as enviable as the one to which Saffre's trust had elevated him!

Line after line, Jacques sifted through his memory for every phrase in the blue telegram… Ah! honestly, of all the nasty insinuations, the most bungled was probably the effort to persuade him he was 'the laughing stock of Paris'… If only to clarify who was fooling whom, Jacques lamented that whoever penned this cowardly defamation had not glimpsed him earlier that day. Indeed, whilst he had been lounging at his club for a while before heading home to dine. During that time, one had merely to watch how he was pampered, sought out, and closely listened to

regarding politics and market matters by Ringemont, Arcole, the Marquis de Fé… and a whole crowd more!… There was no disputing it!… Jacques held the unshakeable belief of being ever more sought after for his wisdom ever since his acumen was reputed to be so highly valued by Baron Saffre!…

Anyway, what 'intimate companion' had they been proposing to point out to him?… And after all, whom would he have had the least justification to fault? Of all the friends who frequented their home, not one could truly be called close… Admittedly, Jacques and Giselle enjoyed several first-rate relationships; however, all held essentially the same rank. And mutually, given this gap, all parties retained some level of formal courtesy. Of those who came round most often, Mulleville, Caystrun, Bréhand—all three had wives. True enough, Tarsul, Chalacet and Renève were single men. Still, not a single one of these people was received by the pair or reciprocated hospitality remotely as much as someone who, in actual fact, was not even a friend but simply a useful connection: Baron Saffre!

Regarding the charge of living off his wife, Jacques thought it more preposterously disgusting than all the rest… Poor darling! He himself most keenly sympathised with her plight, isolated as they were without relations, sadly! nor any help to be had in life's journey, with absolutely nothing to depend on save a husband's competence… who might pass away, be struck down by illness… Yes! Jacques knew all too well, month after month, to the last ha'penny, what Giselle was obliged to depend on from him only, him and no other, a tireless husband whose endeavours, blessedly! had quickly become gainful and well-paid, courtesy of Baron Saffre!…

Still, the frequency with which that name constantly cropped up at last made Jacques concede the extent to which the Baron had genuinely invaded his life. Forever Saffre's shadow looming on the horizon of every obstacle surmounted, surfacing at every turn as the reason behind events or the standard by which to judge others!…

Jacques made sure, of course, to avoid the ungratefulness of becoming vexed so hastily with someone who had done him good turns… But could not one say that Saffre had brought about this anonymous assault himself?

Because it was beyond question that every nasty assumption had sprung from the baron's attitude, his contempt for wagging tongues, the coarse presumption with which he went about being obliging so recklessly!... After all, was not he, the object of Saffre's largesse, the first to be stunned—nearly thrown off balance—when the man had created for him this sort of stipend within his advisory circle, something only made acceptable by its being a prestigious post as well as a lucrative one?... To be sure, Jacques d'Exireuil credited himself with having thoroughly vindicated the baron's trust by bringing his talents to bear. In his selection of a right-hand man, Saffre had struck gold!... Still, Jacques had not forgotten the small affront to propriety he had experienced at the outset, being appraised in such a way—even if it served him well—merely from outward impressions, as one might put it.

All at once, a sharp, straightforward idea—a brightness of pure intuition—lodged itself in Jacques's brain, dispelling all the frivolous, illusory thoughts that had been murkily swirling about.

Ah! It was not yet anything like mistrust towards Giselle!... But here was the dawn of lucidity through which

he was beginning to make out, deep within himself, blurred outlines of reality, and his sentiments about Saffre increasingly showed signs of dislike, suspicion, and finally rage…

Good Lord! he thought to himself, if my wife were playing me false, surely I would feel no different from how I feel just now? Dash it all! It is a ridiculous thought; yet suppose for a moment… So what of it? I would be convinced it was not happening, just as I am convinced right now! With this confidence of mine, I am actually the same as all those husbands I have made sport of! I am certain that in reality I am not like them at all. But what evidence have I got? Where do I observe this? How would I know for certain? My likeness to the naive ones is glaringly obvious; whatever sets me apart, if anything does, is bound to be invisible, and I have no evidence for it apart from my own blind faith…

And now, to crown it all, somebody is tipping me off, trying to warn me… I have been shown no real evidence, admittedly; but nonetheless, somebody has gone to the effort of writing to alert me to something that certainly bears looking into… And for half an hour I have stayed

put, utterly composed, not bestirring myself, letting this matter rest undisturbed!

By now, Jacques d'Exireuil had a pressing desire to escape the novel state of mind he had just stumbled into. Not if the whole firmament crashed down would he resign himself to being made a fool of! Yet besides, he reasoned, one is not really duped—and if one has been, one stops being so—the moment one starts to question… Thus, surrendering to this concept of painful relief, he boldly imposed on himself thereafter the most dreadful suppositions.

He gazed at his wife, elegantly recumbent, absent of expression, beneath the luminance she cast about her, entirely golden due to her locks and her complexion.

Right then, it occurred to him that she had exhibited remarkably strange unconcern a while ago, by not pressing to know more about the meaning of the telegram… Usually so hasty and persistent in her inquisitiveness, what had stopped her from asking more?

He said to her:

„You're not angry with me, I hope?"

Without looking up from her book, Giselle shook her head no. What Jacques found telling was her complete lack of puzzlement in responding so curtly… Why had not she instantly wondered aloud what cause she would have to be angry with him?… Did this mean she was still fixated on the small incident he had left her in the dark about?…

„Perhaps I was wrong," he continued… „You might well think I'm keeping secrets from you?"

She went on without lifting her gaze. Once more she signalled no in that slightly listless yet distracted fashion.

Was she genuinely this enthralled by what she was reading, Jacques pondered?… His mind went back to how she used to be quite another person, there on that same lounger, whenever he had merely called out to her. Back then, whatever she held—whether fiction or fancywork—would have swiftly fallen aside so she could attend to him immediately, eyes bright, lips parted, arms welcoming…

Besides, she seemed intent on maintaining her statue-like composure indefinitely… After some moments, it was plain she had forgotten to move forward in her reading. He observed her keenly in her perfect immobility.

He stilled his breathing and kept watch, crushed by the tension of waiting, passionately engaged in this scrutiny where he could see he was about to catch his wife red-handed, remaining patient at length to ensure he had her dead to rights…

Henceforth, Jacques had solid proof that this would-be book lover was putting on an act! What could be going through her mind? It seemed wholly incredible that she might have sniffed out, in any measure at all, what that alarming wire meant… Yet come to think of it, why might not she have been aware in advance of this looming danger? Or else, if she dwelt under the perpetual threat of false witness, should not that suffice to make her perceive exposure lurking in every circumstance? Oh! How might one uncover whether something was buried deep, far down in that delightful head—perhaps lethally loathsome? Indeed, how could one differentiate, within the inscrutable, inaccessible darkness of someone else's mind, between a carefully concealed truth and the utter absence of any deception?

In an instant, Jacques called to his wife, his voice carrying a change she immediately perceived.

“Giselle!” he called out, with nothing to follow.

As she lifted her preoccupied face to meet his, she had managed to place there, on this occasion, an expression of astonishment. However, she instantly lost her poise on perceiving the odd, relentless focus he trained upon her. Nevertheless, there was not a spasm or flutter across her features. Her distress proved larger, nearly sublime. During that instant, whose tragic import their numerous sentimental and sensuous bonds allowed them both to perceive, the most transcendent of bodily occurrences took place in the young woman. There appeared, rising to the surface of her skin, that crimson emergence of human conscience.

The blood rushed to Giselle’s face in a blazing, deepening flush that might have sprung from hellfire. She stood helpless before this strange mutiny of the body, which had ceased to shield the treacherous mind, undone by this sudden uprising of the flesh that delivered up the soul, its guilty master.

In a beat of portentous pause, this voiceless admission split the quiet open like a burst of naked truth.

Then, in one fierce surge, the husband launched himself at the woman.

Ere she could devise word or deed, Giselle found her every thought arrested, her whole vigour trapped, with all thinkable cunning, each half-pardonable duplicity, every cowardly impulse that panicked weakness might excuse… Indeed, all that she was in that instant—throbbing with fear, terror-struck, still breathing—had been imprisoned by those two hands that grabbed her, fastening on her wrists like iron manacles.

Before she could draw breath, the pair of them eye to eye, Jacques cast at her the ultimate word that annihilated every trace of doubt, every chance to disavow—that devastating, unarguable, ominous name, like an oath against heaven:

"Saffre!" he bellowed in one explosive cry.

That single name said it all. He needed say no more. She could offer no reply. Through that sharp cry, they had both grasped all there was to grasp.

Giselle kept her lips sealed tight. She pulled back, shrinking from the fevered breath of his terrible intuition that singed her face.

“Then it really is true?…”

Yet she made no attempt to contradict him. Her mouth produced only a choking gasp. Her eyes closed tight as tremors wracked her entire frame. Such was the brutalising grip on her arms that, unaware of her actions, her tortured nerves forced her into resistance…

“Answer me, damn you!… Say a word… or just bloody well shriek!” he barked with savage fury, hauling her up by force.

His vicious thrust threw her straight back down, and she fell to her knees with a hollow thump that reverberated through the carpet.

“All I can tell you,” she choked through her tears… “is that I’m breathing again at last, now the lies have ended!”

“Do you realise what’s coming to a woman of your sort?…”

“Kill me if you want… Now I’m free, I’m happy… I love you!”

“Shut up!…”

“I love you!… I love you!” she proclaimed again with frenzied passion.

She summoned enough force to press her mouth against the hands that clutched her with such awful violence. Moving her lips swiftly between them, she blessed them with kisses as if they were fetters of purification and grace.

"Spare me the performance!... You miserable thing, who've become the kept woman of some aged roué!"

"No, no! Don't speak that way!... Jacques, you know that's not true, don't you?... If you could believe such a thing, I'd no longer be able to love you! That would make you more wretched than me!... Oh! Him—I was nothing more than his victim during those dreadful moments!... The bondwoman one mistreats and makes into one's grotesque toy!..."

"You're not seriously telling me he ravished you by force?"

"Ah! You jest, when that's the very truth of it! I swear to you!..."

"Then what reason had you to hide it?... You ought to have told me straight away, that we might both be avenged at once..."

She said nothing in return.

“So,” he pressed on, “you must have pardoned the man?... As recently as yesterday evening, I thought you bore his presence rather easily?...”

“Oh! Cruel one! You must feel that nothing but truth remains for you in my heart full of love... Come, rip it all away, and my life with it if you want, all at once!...”

“That’s quite enough theatrics!... So you were taken by force, you claim—but did you never afterwards capitulate to that rogue—answer me straight?”

“I never stopped hating him, rejecting him, cursing him to his face!”

“And he settled for that, did he?”

“My Lord!” she wailed in her abjection, “My Lord!... How wretchedly low I’ve fallen!... Please listen, Jacques! After he’d crushed me that day, it didn’t end there... I knew such days of damnation again... Oh, show mercy! Don’t choke the life from me now! Wait till I’ve told you all... Yes, his summons soon came for me again, to force me, in that dishonour where I seemed already dead to myself! And I realised I was still alive to suffer, to writhe in agony again, and die yet again of shame.”

Jacques let her go in a fit of fury, making fists and brandishing them at the void.

"You!" he spat out... "That beast!... You went to him, as you came to me! He knew you, as I'd known you, as I have known you!... Him!... him!... Like me! like me!" he kept saying, stamping furiously like a man gone mad.

And with both hands he pressed hard on his eyes, as if seeking to annihilate the picture of what it was to have Giselle.

She lay prostrate, tragic yet beautiful, convulsing with sobs, her face likewise concealed, burying it deep in the creases of her arms underneath her.

Jacques moved back towards that lifeless figure. He caught hold of the golden rope of hair above his wife's nape, so temptingly exposed to savage handling. And lifting her head up, he made her look like some frightened beast being held aloft by its pelt.

"What made you do such a thing?... How in God's name could you?..."

Being held in such an undignified fashion forced Giselle's face into the most miserable contortion. Her expression had shrunk and been dragged utterly rear-

ward. Her hair straining at the temples left her eyelids at half-mast; even so, she managed to answer, her slack mouth pulled into an ironic rictus by the tension:

“I’m not worthy of forgiveness… Everything I was raised to believe, everything I’ve come to know shows me that no act is more beyond redemption, no offence more terrible than what you want me to answer for… But still, there’s something inside me that objects to your verdict and that of the world—yes, something that fights back and wishes to scream in my justification!…”

Jacques broke off from physically tormenting her; he set her free with the words:

“Now, explain yourself! I demand it!… And none of your fine words!”

Keeping to her knees before him, she pulled her shoulders back.

“Do let me,” she beseeched him, “say what I need to say. Just five good minutes is all I ask!… Please don’t get angry if all I can say is what little I understand!… However did we get here?… Oh! however?… But you’ve got to recall it as well!… You were on the verge of setting off for the back of beyond. You’d just got through telling me we

would be separated for one, two, maybe three years! In my mind, you might just as well have said we were splitting up for good… You seemed perfectly able to stomach the prospect of living without one another!… But you loved me dearly, isn't that so?…"

She paused, at last finding the nerve to face him. As if bleeding from her very soul, silvery tears coursed along her burning cheeks, glistened in the fur at her neck, or splashed in great drops onto her tremulous breast.

"You did!" she carried on, joining her hands in supplication, "you did love me truly!… Surely I can tell that, however you fight it, you love me still?… Ah! don't say otherwise: you love me still! And that, to me, is the cruellest thing!… Believe me, nothing could be more dreadful than hearing you say again that you love me still… What more exquisite pain, if you should whisper those words… oh! like you once did, ever so gently, right by my ear!…"

She pulled away at this notion, eyes crazed with fright… Then, keeping her distance, she continued:

"Being a man, you could imagine it feasible, quite normal in fact, to leave me on my own and gallantly pursue

your honourable obligations. And we've all silently agreed from the start that with men honour takes precedence over all else, insists on being served before anything. Love mustn't dare complain; you merely allot it the leftovers of your schedule and your heart… But I—I'm a woman, and before anything, I exist only as a woman in love; I was the one who idolised you… Jacques, oh Jacques, you must trust me! I'm the one who idolises you still!… Once love cried out for you in its fiercest intensity, it was honour's turn to hold its tongue. In the name of love, you might have asked anything of me—to run away and hide wherever, to attempt whatever existence, or to meet death together… All would have been welcomed, embraced; I'd have cheered you with passionate thanks-giving. So long as with you! beside you!… Forever united! … My God! What was beyond my endurance wasn't the guilty wifehood, wasn't telling you lies every day or degrading myself vilely before my own conscience!… Nor was it imagining that in your eyes, at this very kind of moment, I might turn into something repugnant to you… No! What proved impossible for me alone was letting you go, not having you always present, close by, mine alone,

though all I had left was to tremble with guilt and shame whenever you talked to me, drew near me, and… and… took me in your arms!… And so, recognising just one option, one loathsome device for keeping you mine… I put up nothing more than a cowardly resistance!… But in this very moment we share, don't you sense what dreadful joy I still feel having you here… ready to scorn me, abhor me, grind me beneath your heel if you like… yet helpless to stop my whole soul from abasing itself at your feet and kissing the ground you've walked upon?…"

Giselle had indeed taken to crawling across the floor, beating her brow upon the ground, desperately labouring to heap upon Jacques, who shrank back from her advance, the fevered outbursts of pain at its most degrading.

When he had no way left to withdraw, nowhere else to shrink to, when the wall blocked his escape, his wife was still crowding him, still tormenting him in her untamed rapture of self-abasement. Crushed by despair, prostrated before him, holding on as to a sacred statue's feet, choking on her own tears, she appeared to entreat her hus-

band to dispatch her instantly if he had no intention of lifting her from ruin.

At this sight—of she who for so long, dawn till dusk… in the dark hours!… had been the crowning glory of his pride, the beloved he had cherished with his most devoted reverence—Jacques d'Exireuil was helpless against the rush of compassion.

He raised her to her feet… In that instant, with the sudden certainty that brings the nearly dead back to thoughts of living at the slightest sign, she believed herself rescued…

Yet he uttered nothing: his throat twisted in spasm, and he collapsed into sobs.

"Ah!" came her cry, "so this is my due… The single chastisement that could truly strike me down and strip me of all courage!…"

Completely undone, she slumped again onto the chair to which her husband had quietly led her.

Additional questions, keen and unremitting, promptly restored her to her senses.

Jacques had brushed off his tears and recovered a semblance of composure. His questioning was clinical,

with forbearance yet no spite, insisting on hearing it all, every last detail… the whole truth! In a firm and level voice, like a magistrate gathering his brief for a capital trial, he enquired about the concrete details, the tools of moral coercion, the chronology, the hows and wherefores, the concealed truth of these betrayals to their very unsayable heart… Such is the power of this dominion by which one gains access to a soul's entire truth, that the husband, at each further revelation, could almost feel himself winning back fragments of his own spouse. And even if it could not undo the other's passage through her, it allowed him at least to reassert himself as definitive master, crushing underfoot the impressions left behind, wearing away beneath his most invasive scrutiny the imprints etched by another man.

Between them, passion no longer raged with its former violence. Certain enquiries were met with a kind of choking embarrassment. And answers, when they came at all, trembled out weakly or died in horrified, ashamed silence…

An excruciating thirst was devouring Giselle from within. Eventually she brought herself to ask diffidently,

as if doubting whether she was allowed. Her husband went to get her something to drink… Next, he helped guide the glass between her teeth, for she was shivering with anxiety and cold.

Much time had passed, and the fire had burnt itself out. The bedding was already arranged, having been prepared beforehand because of the malady that had kept her huddled by the fire since morning. He instructed her to lie down, to avoid catching further cold or worsening her cough… As she followed his instructions obediently, he averted his gaze, unwilling to see any of his wife's beauty, plagued by the damning vision of what had been done with it.

Now that she lay in her bed, Giselle experienced a boundless sense of relief. That he had personally helped slake her thirst gave the drink a heavenly power to infiltrate her blazing heart drop by precious drop… She kept perfectly still, rent and ruined, but it was a form of salvation. A monster had been born from her conscience; but its abominable shudders no longer writhed within her.

As the night wore on towards morning, Jacques drew up a chair at his wife's bedside. Oh, how it soothed her to

have him remain close by!... Not once did he consider leaving for his separate room. By pure instinct, he had chosen a place that struck him immediately as his own: removed, but only slightly so.

Not one of them could even think of sleeping. All talk had fallen silent. From time to time their looks would cross, only to dart away immediately.

Lost in thought yet firm in purpose, Jacques scowled beneath dark brows, fingered his chestnut whiskers nervously, and saw clearly his full measure of fault. The wreckage of their home was his doing; his heedless transgression had defiled not only his wife's purity, but something even more sacred to the home: the luminous love she had borne him... Unable to stare down his own contrition, he banished it to take shelter in more fruitful thoughts of revenge.

Far ahead of sunrise, when the lamp started failing, rapid traded glances betrayed their joint anxiety about the coming blackness... Then all light died away. Now they could only listen to the occasional sound of breathing in the dark to mark those moments when their emotions grew overwhelmingly oppressive. From time to time

Giselle's cough would sound, and she would smother it as though it were indecorous in the grave silence.

Oh, had Jacques but sensed and heeded the urge to press his hands to that lovely fevered brow, now invisible and leaden against the lacy pillowslips!... Such regal mercy was his to command, to cure in an instant the wounds that made that precious head, mere inches away, suffer its invisible bleeding!...

Indeed, he commanded more than mere kingly might when confronted with this creature's reverent penitence. The adored husband now stood transformed into a lord of measureless grace. Giselle dared not hope for a miracle, yet humbly awaited one; she could envision just one kind of pardon that might be possible, one alone that could be genuine and real... That unspeakable absolution would have come upon her in perfect beatific meditation, and rendered her clean and virginal, as if blessed by sacred Visitation.

At the stroke of seven that morning, Jacques rose sharply to his feet. Moving to pull aside the window curtains, he glimpsed himself in a looking-glass by the dim morning light—features decomposed from want of sleep,

his complexion cadaverous, his whole countenance wasted, looking every inch the malefactor.

Not lingering another moment, he made for an exit from the chamber.

Giselle had pulled herself up amongst the bedclothes.

"Where are you going?" she demanded... "Oh! Don't leave me! Stay with me!..."

Finding he took no notice of her, she climbed out of bed, chased after him, and tried to keep him there by wrapping her naked arms forcefully about his neck.

Jacques shook her off with violent determination. In a voice full of menace and with a sinister expression that sent a shudder through his wife, he gave her this warning:

"Keep out of matters that are none of your business!"

"What do you mean to do?" she breathed, her face losing all colour.

"To pay Baron Saffre a visit..."

She knotted her hands desperately and stumbled over her words:

"Jacques!... what are you plotting?"

His reply came quite matter-of-factly, as though speaking of a foregone conclusion, something bound to happen, whose occasion was at hand:

“I’m going to kill him.”

“Oh! please, you mustn’t go there!… He’s a frightful man… you won’t stand a chance!… He’ll find a way to bring ruin upon you instead!”

Jacques fixed his eyes on her with almost inhuman willpower written across his features, saying in return:

“When your heart holds all that mine does to bear you up, you’re certain to be the mightiest!”

Giselle inclined her head before the vehemence of this manly passion, against which, not for the first time, she understood herself to be powerless. It was honour’s voice again that she heard rumbling through her husband’s zeal, drowning out love’s fearful demands and desperate nays.

“Then at the very least,” she beseeched him still, “arm yourself!”

Jacques caught her face with fingers gone taut, sharply making her aware of their claw-like grip. His nos-

trils aquiver, biting down on lips and syllables alike, he spoke:

"I'll go for his throat, pull his tongue out by the roots, blind him with my fingers, stamp his brains into the ground!..."

Upon the young woman's cheeks, the chill of horror ran through the grooves carved by his nails. A quiver of the sworn revenge reached down into her innermost being.

Yes! yes!... Jacques, strike him dead!..." she screamed from the core of her heart.

And as he departed for whatever might follow, amid the confusion of unthinking farewells, their two mouths touched of their own accord and fused in a common breath of hatred, in this murderous wish that rose from the innermost feelings of their hearts.

IX

The Baroness Saffre

What should have been a two-day absence had lengthened into almost a week for Baron Saffre. To begin with, his last-ditch efforts and dogged persistence with the British banks had come to nothing. For his ultimate gambit—staving off his homecoming with nothing save assurance of certain doom—he had taken an abrupt turn to sound out the German money markets. This ultimate endeavour, however, had been just as futile, achieving nothing beyond leaving international finance bemused by his eccentric ways.

The hour was advanced when Saffre, unkempt and in a state of nervous excitement, got back to his residence. More than simply untidy, he was thoroughly grubby,

evidence of sustained neglect of his appearance. Such a departure from his customary elegance did not escape the servant presenting him with the heap of letters and cards that had piled up in his absence. He further reported that Monsieur d'Exireuil had come by on two occasions, urgently requesting him and disbelieving claims of the baron's departure, of which he had had no word.

"Damn it, he's a pest!" Saffre roared with mindless exasperation. "He can bloody well leave me alone! And not wind me up! Since when must I notify him of all my doings?"

Abruptly composed again for no reason, and with an odd urge to explain himself, he said further:

"In any case, I sent him a wire en route saying to come tomorrow… That should have told him I wasn't at home!"

He took himself straight off to his chamber. Still in his fur-lined travel gear, he collapsed into a chair facing the blazing hearth, inching his heels forward past the and-irons to prop them on the logs. His head was unhealthily benumbed; he babbled aloud to himself in disconnected fashion, unconscious of the smell of something burning.

For a considerable while, he had not stirred from his pose; nor had he noticed that Baroness Saffre was presently at his side.

It took multiple greetings from her to bring him round.

At last Saffre swivelled his head towards the reedy voice. He was so removed from any thought of his wife that his eyes—instead of lapsing into the meaningless familiarity born of marital closeness—showed a trace of that look when meeting someone you are certain you know, someone you jolly well do recognise.

“Did you travel well?” enquired the Baroness.

“No!”

“You look dreadfully fatigued…”

He made no reply.

“Oh dear!” she carried on, “you’ve scoffed at my modest health precautions far too much. You’d have been wiser to follow them too… These past few years, you’ve spent yourself… in all manner of ways! You’ve frightfully overtaxed your constitution! You’ve been reckless… utterly reckless!” she concluded in a determined voice

Saffre had never known her to possess, which strangely roused him from his torpor.

He drew up his commanding bulk and worked both hands over his wide face, as though trying to smooth away the sombre wrinkles and grimace that had settled there.

“I’m fine!” he mumbled… “Quite all right. There’s not a thing the matter with me!”

He was puzzled at himself for having cared about something his wife had uttered, or for putting on a different face from his habitual one for her sake.

But the baroness had made her way to her husband’s rooms for no other reason than her pressing need to have it out with him.

“Speaking for myself,” she proceeded, “it would have been disgracefully remiss of me not to be alarmed by whatever grave turn your state might have taken… And now, I know what it is!”

She made this pronouncement with such acute, distinct emphasis that it bored through the heavy dullness clouding Satfre’s brain, stabbing like an awl.

“What is it you think you know?” he grunted.

His frown, at any other point in their marriage, would have been sufficient to reduce his wife to silence and have her pretending she knew nothing. But such times were gone.

"Do let's," she persisted, "have this out with perfect frankness… After all, I'm not here to lay my reproaches at your door; I've come to prevent you laying yours at mine."

Saffre stood up, remaining under the spell of whatever enigmatic purpose lay behind the Baroness's unaccustomed daring. Since whatever imagination he had left was clinging to one subject alone, he allowed himself to believe her involvement was fatefully linked to it and could only be meant to deliver him from ruin.

"What are you getting at?" he pressed hastily.

"I'm talking about your financial affairs. I've learnt they're going from bad to worse…"

Out of pure habit, unaided by either will or reason which were busy destroying themselves, the Baron's face assumed a tranquil air. He was once again in his element —the well-trodden territory of braggadocio—a smile gracing his face. He answered his wife as if conducting busi-

ness with Happarsheim or hammering out whatever transaction in his office:

“Never, in any aspect whatsoever, have my circumstances been better than they are now!…”

The Baroness executed a brief gesture of categorical dismissal.

“No,” she said, “you’re at the end of your rope!… The moment someone put me on my guard, I made haste to seek advice from trustworthy people of unimpeachable reputation… A prompt investigation was shrewdly carried out… And I’ve been furnished with the most distressing proof in overwhelming quantity…”

Saffre’s face had taken on yet another cast. His eyes rolled about with the restless wariness of a cornered animal; savagely, he lurked in wait for prey to tear apart, be it thing or being, from whatever his wife was laying before him.

“I’m a mother with children to think of,” she argued back… “Given the situation, was I meant to sit idle?…”

Despite his bewilderment, the baron saw the final blow taking shape; he realised that another overwhelming peril was poised to crash upon him and whatever

ruins still serving as his guard… Putting off his dismissal of truth, his relapse into bold-faced lying, he hastened to tackle what pressed most:

“Keep yourself out of all this!… If you value our remaining amicable, be certain to leave things be, to chance nothing!…”

The baroness hastened to set this interview’s central issue squarely between them, to voice the significant words, so she might entrench herself behind them henceforth. She pronounced hurriedly:

“All the same, I have to arrange for separate property rights…”

Saffre’s face grew thunderous.

“Oh!” he burst out… “You couldn’t bring yourself to such a vile act?”

But his wife, making no protest, did nothing save grow more ashen atop her paleness.

Initially, he lost his bearing… Shortly, without much capacity for thought, but acting on instinct, with unconscious demonstrative gestures, as if always fending off the same assault, he rushed headlong into speech:

"Good God, woman!... Splitting our property would be the worst possible move!... Just stop and think!... Name one financial man whose fortune wouldn't crumble under such loss of reputation, such a violent disruption to his business?... No, I won't let you! This blow you'd strike at me would rebound on you with equal force... And how could you face our children, having shattered their prospects on the pretext of preserving them!..."

Her reply was unwavering:

"Speaking of prospects, our only hope lies in what I myself can rescue from whatever you still have."

"Never!" Saffre erupted, "You won't bleed me dry in this fashion!... This is complete lunacy! Tell me! What on earth do you think you'd get out of it?..."

"The three million five hundred thousand francs I brought to our marriage, plus another eleven million that various bequests have added to my fortune..."

"So you're quibbling over these crumbs when between us we command perhaps four hundred million!..."

"But considering it's all vanished..."

"Rubbish!...My capital's in the thick of it, bound to return twofold at minimum!... Don't interrupt my grand

design; let me throw myself into this business with everything I've got!... Wasn't it I who single-handedly built nine-tenths of this vast fortune from nothing but what you brought me and what my parents left?... Wasn't I a damned clever fellow to pull that off?... Mark my words, when you've got a head like mine, you're the foremost man in existence!" he bellowed, beating his forehead and skull frenziedly as if to crush a mutiny of ideas.

He rushed on with his harangue in mad intensity. Even as he kept knowing—if increasingly muddily—that he was washed up, he insanely returned to entangling himself in his future monthly settlements. He held forth with the same confidence of market newcomers, with those artless aspirations of the unschooled he had previously enjoyed deriding in high-society folk at their wit's end. And so it became his turn to be inflamed by equally deceptive enthusiasm—he, an old hand at the money game, in a final paroxysm of flag-waving for capitalist conquests.

While he indulged in the workings of his madness, the Baroness, wordless and small-framed, kept as fixed as a bollard. She held back from opposing her husband,

respectfully biding her time to tell him herself the critical thing he had to learn from her. She remained quiet, wrapped in the sorrowful propriety of fulfilling her wifely duties to the last, certain that these unsettling ordeals had cost her her wellbeing, and that, given the overriding necessity, she had—pitifully!—withdrawn from her careful, assiduous bid for longevity.

Saffre, with long-winded fervour, sought to acquaint his wife with all the existing and forthcoming glories of the undertaking beneath whose ruins he no longer felt crushed. He construed the Baroness's resolute silence as agreement with all his unreasonable ravings. He revelled in his imagined conquest. He rambled through boundless expositions, starting over, confusing himself and sorting himself out amongst words that dropped helter-skelter from his thoughts onto his tongue… Then without warning, at the turn of a rambling thought, he came to a stop, staring blankly, lost for what came next…

The Baroness grasped this opportunity to have done with it.

"I must let you know," she pronounced, "that my suit has already been entered…"

Saffre's first response was to observe her with blank incomprehension… After which the import of her statement hit him where it hurt, maddeningly.

When he stepped towards his wife, she quickly found it prudent to place the entire breadth of the large table occupying the middle of the room between herself and him…

Of the bizarre illness now wholly overtaking her husband she possessed no awareness whatsoever; but the murky beast-like parts of her intuition had shivered at it, just as dogs blindly smell the fury in their fellows.

"You dared to do such a thing?" he roared… "Without my permission!… You will pen a letter to your lawyer this instant telling him to abandon this deranged whim of yours!…"

She shook from head to toe; nevertheless her voice resounded as though forged from iron.

"The fact is," she answered back… "the law stipulated that the claim be posted within three days… And I've just been told that… as of this morning… it's all been carried out!…"

Saffre, smitten in his very essence, made a demented rush to carry out any deed… an action beyond description, aimless and nameless…

Arms thrust out, he could not tell himself if it was to pulverise his wife, or to bolt outside no matter where, anyplace where strangers could be found in whom to choke off this fatal blow to his reputation…

But his body's strength let him down. He ran out of air. And with his twin fists he braced himself on the table, at the far side of which his wife held herself watchfully ready.

Even as his mind crumbled, Saffre could still perceive one truth: the thunderous haste with which they had set about finishing him off… This was not, after all, one of those drawn-out separations of bed and board that deal only with matters of the heart and soul, with how people live and love. Financial disentanglement, however, that protective measure for capital, that instrument for liberating marital wealth, commands the most exceptional priority in the courts. The proceedings against Saffre might be concluded in four weeks' time.

“You’ve no idea,” he said, struggling for breath, “what you’ve set in motion!… You’re destroying more than my fortune!… I might have pulled through with some time… As it stands, I’m facing bankruptcy… financial annihilation!…”

The baroness had nothing to say. Having discharged her strict duty to speak the truth, her sole desire was to remove herself from the room.

His face flushed dark red as Saffre strained to produce his panting speech:

“You… when I was off my guard… you’ve cut me down!… Every last one of them will attack… They’ll sink their teeth in… shred me to bits!… Can you not hear them crying thief?… And the courts will agree! Market-rigging, they’ve outlawed that! they’ve outlawed everyone who’s on the ground!… So it’s prison for me, is it?…”

These words made his goggling eyes grew rounder still before he exploded into laughter. His features contorted briefly in spasmodic grins that lent him an uncommonly cheerful look.

"Ha! ha! ha!" he bellowed. "Baron Saffre locked up! Oh, that's rich! The trick came off beautifully! You never saw it coming, what?"

Immediately resuming his expressionless façade, he went on:

"But why act without asking me first? What's that? Eh? Now then! Will you speak up, you little wretch?"

As he closed in on his wife with measured steps, eyes brimming with uncanny reverie and mouth pinched shut, looking terrifyingly intent on forcing a response from her, she murmured as she edged backwards:

"I was too terrified of you—I'd never have found the boldness to do it if I'd glimpsed ahead of time how you're behaving now!"

Thereupon she made her escape; she rushed to lock herself away, with double turns of the keys and every available bolt.

The moment she was safely protected from all harm, the Baroness had but one thought—to take herself to bed without assistance, as if relying solely on her yet-strained nerves to see her through what needed doing. Still, she had the foresight to dose herself carefully with a concoc-

tion that—on any regular occasion—would have all but assured her instant rest, and perchance a touch of appetite come dawn… But what medicine, she pondered, could hold its own against such convulsions?…

Even so, she had begun to nod off rather successfully when there came a tactful knock at the door through which she could reach the servant on duty.

“Who is it?” she asked, jolting awake.

“My lady Baroness,” came the voice of her personal maid, “it’s Joseph—he’s just been round saying he’s never seen his lordship in such a way… He’s saying there’s nothing he knows of that would hold the Baron back just now!… or whether his lordship mightn’t even go so far as to kill himself!…”

For pity’s sake! What was the Baron’s wife meant to undertake now, given all she had already put herself through?… Great heavens! What else could they possibly expect?… How much more was she capable of?… Had she not spent herself to the very edge of what was bearable? And lo, her heart was beset once more by distressing palpitations!… After all, should not one expect that a despot as fierce as her spouse would undergo some breakdown

in these conditions before coming to terms? And ought not he to desire seclusion above all, given his state of utmost vexation?... He, take his own life?... Could a man of Baron Saffre's mettle truly be susceptible to such weakness? To come to such a pass, he must surely have brought upon himself those shameful, disgraceful liabilities he had actually alluded to just now!... Surely he had merely thrown that out as a heavy-handed attempt to sway her still!... How might one discern in these utterances more than mere oaths and idle threats born of resourceful anger?... But then again, what if Baron Saffre had actually come to desire death?... In that case, he would have known in his heart that his pronouncements were not overblown?... Oh God! Oh God! Oh God! Was it credible that this family patriarch had subjected his own to the splash of such infamy?... Should they have to survive months of ignominious dread during a criminal lawsuit? And must all the Saffres be doomed hereafter to as hermetic a life as those penal years of which the Baron had pronounced himself deserving?...

Suddenly the Baroness could see it: the police were about to invade... Dear God! The intolerable thought of

that parade barging through her town house doors, coming to carry out an arrest—possibly in full daylight… as if they were raiding some wretch's hovel!

"Tell Joseph," she cried out through the dividing wall, "he must leave his master in peace… mustn't provoke him any more with constant supervision… mustn't contradict him at all!"

At this point, sleep was the furthest thing from her mind. She was terrified of anything that could eventually put a stop to this state of affairs, yet at the same time vaguely afraid that the end might be too slow in coming, with an inadmissible, fretful yearning that it would all just finish now…

But scarcely had a moment passed when the lady's maid returned in panic, hammering at the door with fresh appeals.

"I beg Your Ladyship to listen!" she wailed… "It's frightful!… Monsieur is ravaging it all!"

This urgent call brought Baroness Saffre bounding out of bed. With trepidation, she eased the door ajar, her caution confirming that only an entirely dependable woman stood there. Standing thus, she listened intently… A caco-

phony of shouts and the crashing of splintered objects rang through every corner of the house…

Saffre was tearing the splendid canvas to shreds, bellowing as he did so—that portrait which, from its lofty position on the first floor, had long appeared the immovable ruler over all the exquisite objects spread out below in infinite array, a kingdom of treasures if ever there was one… Statuettes, vases, marble figures, bronzes and glazed pottery—each in its turn was seized by those giant hands and sent hurtling down to shatter on the vestibule tiles or the winter garden floor, swallowed up by every chasm the ground floor's depths laid open to destruction's giddy rampage… And having set off at full tilt, his feet scything down every lampstand along the way, Saffre bore his raging clamour deep into the galleries beyond, where such riches stood defenceless before him!…

The lady of the house had no room left for self-deception about what precisely was happening, nor about its hazardous repercussions—particularly where others were concerned—now that such disaster had been let loose under her roof. All through her petite form ran a shudder of dread and fierce resolve.

“Quickly now!” she commanded. “Every servant must hurry and mount guard around their master!… And when there is the slightest chance, fetch our doctors!… A man cannot be left like this!…”

And with no more ado, she barricaded herself within her own rooms—as though she were the frailest item, and needless to say the most precious, that she had any duty to preserve…

At every doorway to her chamber, she piled up furniture that stood higher and weighed more than she did. Yet in shifting them about, she commanded a miraculous agility, an endless wellspring of strength born of self-preservation, which at that instant magnified her very presence into that of a priestess devoted to her own salvation!

…

The Baroness Saffre, when she made up her mind to pursue legal proceedings on the strength of the notary’s well-founded advice, had not thought to inform her daughters or her son beforehand. In the absence of their father, she had felt it would be improper to apprise them of what chiefly affected him before he himself knew, and

thereby to invite them to meddle in a decision where their filial loyalty was best left unexercised.

However, from the earliest hour on the morning following the dramatic scenes enacted at the Saffre residence, she sent word to her children, phrasing her summons with the most careful diplomacy.

The first to heed the maternal summons was Arthur Saffre. He exhibited the greater part of what are deemed the qualities of a good son: he had never, as a young man, fallen into debt, and he had married according to convention, following the choice that his parents' predilections had made for him.

With a few brief words, Arthur was told of the twofold disaster, both pecuniary and psychological, that now crushed his father. He was utterly dismayed. He threw himself upon his mother, an emotional gesture that unsettled her, principally because it left her somewhat physically shaken. No murmur of regret passed his lips at this tremendous loss of riches. In fact, he immediately made the observation that he was already richer than he had any need to be, reserving his distress for that cata-

strophe alone which had afflicted the Baron Saffre in his very person.

“I wouldn’t advise you to see him,” said the Baroness. “The doctors, just now gone, have warned me that any cause for disturbance would be very damaging to him…”

At all events, Arthur did not persist. However genuine and keen his sorrow, it was destined that morning to be hemmed in by an extraordinary concern that had beforehand occupied almost the whole of his thoughts. Later that same day—which was precisely why he had made haste to call before lunch, more promptly than his sisters—the Academy of Fine Sciences was to bestow upon him the distinction of reading aloud a short treatise he had submitted. It was a success carefully laid over time and pursued through much solicitation, up many flights of stairs… This alone occupied his thoughts as he came. From the time of his arrival, when he managed to tear himself away from contemplating his father’s alarming plight, it was only because this vision of his academic future was the single thing within him that would not consent to be forgotten. Amid the fortuitous inflation of his self-regard, the unwelcome tidings had been stripped

of much of their virulence. In the end, to experience the full weight of a calamity, one requires the complete leisure to do so, the unhurried hour in which to dwell upon it. But Arthur Saffre, however heartbroken he might be, felt equally hurried, and uneasy into the bargain. Taking leave of his mother, he suddenly asked:

"The servants have been instructed, I presume, to prevent any word of what took place here from spreading abroad?..."

He was now bracing himself for another cruel turn of fate: the hostile gust of some tempest brewing outside, provoked by the upheavals in his family—an inconceivable alteration to the order of proceedings within the immortal orbits of the Institute.

When the Bréhands made their entrance later on, Olivier's manner proved a good deal less impassive. From the stroke of luck that had secured him his wondrous marriage, he had fixed upon the future of his fortune with the single-minded passion of an inventor. He had kept his eyes fixed perpetually on the day when Baron Saffre's inheritance would fall to him—the day destined to grant him the honour of having brought the science of amass-

ing millions to its supreme refinement. It was meant to be the due compensation for all those years he had bent his most sustained energies towards imagining how best to employ his remarkable haul of money… And all at once, he saw the boundless territory of a New World—which he had discovered in his Parisian voyaging—melting away before his eyes, just when he had perhaps been on the eve of claiming, by conquistador's right, a dukedom or marquisate!…

At the sight of his crestfallen expression, Baroness Saffre attempted to steer him towards more comforting thoughts. She gestured towards Madame Bréhand, who sat prostrate with sorrow in all her plumpness, although it was quite impossible to say whether the distress trickling forth in a monotonous susurrus from between her well-padded cheeks was occasioned by her father's woes or by her husband's ill-humoured countenance.

"At the very least," sighed the Baroness, thinking of her other son-in-law, "your home is a happy one!… Believe me, dear Olivier, yours is the better portion here below!… You shall always have a loving companion at your side!…"

At that moment, Bréhand was reflecting that the yearly allowance of a hundred thousand francs which his father-in-law had until now provided him, quite apart from any legal agreement, would no longer be forthcoming either. And when, prompted by his mother-in-law's words, his eyes were pulled towards the companion of his life's every instant, past and to come, her hideousness revealed itself to him, in all its plenitude, for the very first time. Lord! In the long run, he had so completely appropriated the enjoyment of his wife's fortune that it had merged, in his soul, with his notion of individual rights and the deployment of his God-given talents. In his state of perturbation, viewing the possession of their town house and the two millions formerly received as nothing more than birthright assets—as though they had been personally acquired by him since the dawn of time—he was about to cry out that with such a hand dealt at the outset, so handsome a man as he had been taken advantage of. His whole conscience rebelled, in perfect good faith, against having been saddled with a young lady destined to be disinherited in this manner… and one of such proportions!

… Of all the visitors she hoped to see, it was the Count de Grommelain whom Baroness Saffre awaited with the greatest anxiety. A letter of considerable urgency had been dispatched to him at the Avenue Kléber, where he remained in residence, all the while taking the most stringent precautions to avoid any contact with his wife.

To this plea, Grommelain had yielded. The news of Saffre's ruin he heard confirmed with perfect coldness, for on this subject he had kept no pretensions any more than illusions. However, the pitiful state into which the Baron had sunk physically appeared to make some impression upon him. He expressed condolences in the manner of a principled man—one who had little taste for the caprices of nature intruding upon family life, who sanctioned only rigid propriety for everyday matters and the instruments of the law for cases of exception.

Baroness Saffre lost no time in turning this semblance of relenting in the Count to her advantage, hoping to bring about a reconciliation between the estranged couple. Her fondest hope as a mother was that her son-in-law would take Marie-Blanche back again, dreading as

she did the prospect of perhaps having to encumber herself with her.

“And now,” said she, “let me, in these dreadful moments we are living through, beseech you to show indulgence… to give up, while there is yet time, your plan to sever ties with my daughter once and for all…”

With a polite motion, Grommelain indicated that he wished to stop her there.

“Do listen!” she pressed on. “There is a major consideration, one to which you have probably given no thought, that should govern your behaviour: your children’s interests!”

“Madam, it is no loss to my children that they should not be reared by their mother.”

“But what of what they are entitled to receive?… As things are now, the inheritance of your wife’s entire fortune is protected for them by your marriage contract… What will be its fate should your union be dissolved?”

“A separation of persons, such as I am requesting, does not modify the inalienability of the assets…”

“As you say! But three years hence, what is to stop Marie-Blanche from seeking, and in all probability secur-

ing, a divorce?… At that point, she would have her fortune entirely at her own disposal once more… Do you suppose she would manage it with any great prudence? …”

In these matters, the baroness spoke with an ease and perspicacity almost equal to that of the solicitors she had been consorting with closely for six days now, and from whom she may well have taken instruction. And indeed, had not those thirty-five years of apparent effacement within her household—spent in silence, in musing, with that faraway expression in her yet so lucid eyes—been employed in pondering all things?

Grommelain turned reflective.

“You would get off lightly,” he ventured, “by arranging for your daughter to be placed under legal guardianship…”

“Ah, my friend, how is one ever to guess the instant when action would be timely?… See for yourself, here and now, to what a state of collapse we have come without having had the least inkling in time!… No, no! Never unlatch, to chance, to the uncertain, to the unforeseen, that door behind which your wife’s fortune is so safely

shut… Look here, suppose I were to pass away fairly soon…”

She gave a shake of the head, as if to confirm that the new anguish of this struggle was still conducting her steadily to her tomb.

“No sooner would I be gone,” she continued with determination, “than Marie-Blanche might have her wits addled, be pushed into who knows what lunacy by the share of the legacy falling to her… the share that will pass to her from me—and I can assure you, it remains very considerable indeed!… For the lawyer handling the estate, from the appraisal of the real property alone… the baron, I’m afraid, owned little enough of that!… this lawyer, as I was saying, regards me as having, here and now, recovered ten to twelve million at the very minimum… And with respect to the stocks and shares, I am determined to make up the balance of what is rightfully mine!… Of course, it is rather meagre when set against the wealth that once rolled through these rooms… But it will yet suffice to let one be of help to one’s loved ones, whenever the occasion arises…”

Much though he might resist, and out of a courteous consideration for a woman advanced in years, Grommelain was falling somewhat under the sway of the authority the baroness had acquired in seizing, with those hands so gaunt as to be nearly transparent, the last reins of the Saffre fortune as it careered towards oblivion.

She took the risk of suggesting:

“Why don’t you take your wife out of Paris, let her recuperate in healthier surroundings, safe from any temptation to go astray?”

“Oh, come now!” he exclaimed. “As though she could bear herself for so much as one day in the country, living like that!”

“I happen to know, on the contrary, that she is most amenable to such an arrangement… She can have no wish but to efface herself, to withdraw from the glittering social whirl, after all that has come crashing down upon her… in her role as wife… and daughter… Her social standing has grown exceedingly uncomfortable, for the time being at least… To go away thus will strike her as altogether fitting. She will accept it as one accepts a time

of mourning—one she knows full well it behoves her to keep…"

Grommelain remained noncommittal. It was, to be sure, just as acceptable a way of resolving his difficulties—to extract his wife from life in Paris and set her up in the country, more or less secluded. The world of the salons would approve of such a measure far more than judicial wrangling, since it would, first and foremost, avoid scandal, and the marriage tie would thereby be protected from public violation of its fundamental sacredness… And even should the devil have a hand in it, and the Countess de Grommelain contrive to betray her husband in the furthest reaches of their country refuge, he reasoned that such misfortune there would never possess the same galling solemnity as in Paris, the same official ring. He would attend to it in whatever manner suited him, rather than having to govern himself, as he had done for years in public, by the rigid standard set by his comrades from the regiment.

The baroness became more explicit still in her insistence:

“All you must do is establish yourselves at Ozerpie, you and my daughter…”

“Ozerpie?” asked Grommelain, his voice mixing bewilderment with bitterness. “The Bréhands consider themselves masters there until the sale goes through!”

“Nothing of the sort! I am assuming control of the property. It appears the purchase was made in my name, employing the actual monies that fell to me from my sister’s inheritance last year.”

Ah, what an alluring prospect—offering the first son-in-law his comeuppance for the preferential treatment the second had made him suffer! Grommelain felt that profound laceration stir anew, the one that had been dealt to his aristocratic pride by the refusal to acknowledge his hunting rights by birth and his bred-in-the-bone passion for estate management. In her reasoning, the baroness had displayed considerable skill in marshalling her forces of persuasion according to the ranking given them by the very nature of rhetoric—summoning warm feelings ahead of cold grudges.

Pressed by her burning anxiety to crown her exertions with success, she still could not prevent herself from

assessing the expensive ramifications of what she was about to propose.

"I'm prepared to give you," she said finally, stumbling over her words, "you and your spouse… the possession… unrestricted possession… of this… of this entire property!"

Given the noble look that had settled upon her countenance, Saint Martin's soul appeared clearly to move her, yet she had captured no more than half the true essence of his example. What with her discomfited airs and verbal gropings, she seemed to have advanced straightaway to the afterthought of beneficence; and her somewhat rueful look recalled nothing so much as the instant when her virtuous archetype had to contend with whatever bit of cape was left him. [*The young Martin was according to legend a soldier serving in the army of Constantine the Great stationed in the French city of Amiens. On a winter's day while riding out of the city gates he saw a poor man shivering from the cold. He promptly cut his cloak in half and gave one half to the beggar. That night while asleep he had a vision of Christ wearing the part of the cloak which he had given to the*

beggar. Christ told the angels who surrounded him: "See how Martin has covered me with his cloak." Martin, who had converted to Christianity as a child but had become a soldier at his father's behest, then left the military to devote his life to the Christian faith.]

Grommelain made an imposing gesture to convey that whatever weight might incline him would join forces with this particular appeal only in a patronising fashion. His rejoinder was:

"The matter you have brought up concerning my children merits some thought on my part. Quite so—I mustn't be responsible for any disadvantage to those unfortunate little ones! I shall give it thought."

"Oh, do listen—your rigour is already mellowing, so don't put off making up your mind! Show yourself amenable at once, and without reservation. Your wife is right at hand. Indulge me by letting me call her in; and see to it that, amid the calamities besetting me, I might at least be granted the consoling spectacle of reconciliation renewed betwixt the pair of you!"

She gave the stock-still Grommelain no chance whatever to reach a decision; she imposed her own by

hurrying off in search of Marie-Blanche. Then, an instant later, it was still the Baroness Saffre who made the couple renew contact, by bringing their fingertips together.

Through this touch, sacramental in its way, they were both of them restoring their conjugal pact. They were willing to step back into it, carrying the vivid recollection of having mutually committed against one another the worst two spouses can possibly do, but also having concluded that, where their respective interests were concerned, they had no better course than to proceed. Brimming with disillusionment, rancour and bile against one another, experience had nevertheless placed them nearer to reaching accord henceforth than in former times when, at the church, they had thoughtlessly exchanged their pledge to love each other. Because surely the most important thing in a marriage is knowing each other?… And know each other they did.

Even so, the Baroness was unwilling to allow this opening meeting of reconciliation to continue for too great a time. In motherly wise she ushered Marie-Blanche out and held her son-in-law back to deliberate with him upon the numerous thorny matters that the fin-

ancial débâcle and mental wreckage of Saffre now urgently demanded.

Concerning the individual himself, hazily dismissed as ruined, not one of the Bréhands or Grommelains had given him a thought. Not one had troubled to enquire what might still lie ahead for him—morally speaking or otherwise, in practical terms at any rate. It seemed that nobody's mind now dwelt upon the person of the one-time lord of the house, in this very residence that he had so recently occupied with such commanding, almost regal, presence…

Yet hold on—there was someone! A certain person had, within the last few minutes, found the means to get into the house and, wholly ignorant of what had transpired the evening before, had no thought save for Baron Saffre, brooded on him wakefully, and consumed himself passionately with the burning impatience to reach him: Jacques d'Exireuil.

Six days and six nights had passed with this visitor waiting in feverish suspense for his opportunity, and he now believed himself on the very brink of it.

When Exireuil had essayed his first visit during that time, the baron had, an hour previously, set off on what was purported to be a two-day journey. After those two days, the visitor who reappeared with such punctuality was confronted yet again with the absence of Saffre, which was, as it happened, dragging on longer than foreseen. Exireuil had taken this to be a precautionary measure designed with him in mind. He had assumed that the one he meant to confront, having received warning too, was standing warily on guard. And from then onwards he had taken up his post, uselessly, along the accustomed routes of a foe who, holed up in his stronghold, had evidently succeeded in making himself impossible to approach.

Yet the imposed delay to his vengeance had in no way lessened the savage tension gripping that uncomplicated soul, fashioned to fall for trickery with fervour and to lash out with heedless fury. There was no argument under his roof, no instant's departure from the unspoken, grave agreement that held the couple fast. They both knew themselves, whatever the outcome, to be inextricably linked by their collusion in the purpose expressed on one

sole occasion. Something damnably fierce cemented every aspect of their union and kept them inseverable. Between them stood not, as the expression has it, a corpse, but far grimmer: a man alive, whose every breath they imagined plagued them both in their agreement and made their very skin prickle with horror.

And so, upon receiving the wire by which Saffre, amidst his peregrinations, named the hour of their meeting upon coming back, Jacques d'Exireuil laid bare his whole being to his wife with just this one word: "Tomorrow!..." And the whole soul of Giselle, as though in profound echo, on the morrow, as she suffered her husband to go from her, exhaled a quiet surrender to whatever should come to pass for her, as for him, following the course of their fate.

Having turned up at roughly three in the afternoon at the gates of the Saffre town house, Exireuil had been taken aback all the same to learn that Monsieur le Baron, although he had in fact come back, was not at home to callers. However much he insisted upon the dispatch that had expressly requested his presence, the injunction seemed absolutely unbreachable. Ready to attempt any

subterfuge to force his way through, Exireuil bethought himself of requesting an audience with the Baroness. The concierge, possessing no orders to the contrary in this regard, permitted entrance to a man he had lately come to know as a close acquaintance of the family.

Precisely then, the Baroness had only just begun consulting with Grommelain about the range of actions she must pursue, relating to business, litigation, and society matters. Apprised of Exireuil's call, she asked that he might oblige her by waiting until she had done with the affair claiming her presence.

The servants had ushered Exireuil into the mirror-lined drawing room. In the streaming sunlight, the chamber shone dazzlingly bright. Glinting reflections and gleaming gilding threw off showers of light against the colourless winter sun. Yet to him—his gaze clouded by fixed purpose, his brain fogged with dark imaginings—this extravagantly luxurious setting seemed merely a lair, and he moved through it with the look of a wild-beast tamer.

A moment later his decision was made, the means to his goal stood clear before him, and every nerve in him

drew taut to bursting. He had to make swift use of the baroness's absence. Previously, Exireuil had been able to acquaint himself with how the dwelling was disposed. He was aware that Saffre's quarters could be gained without going back through the vestibule, perpetually manned by footmen, and without having to mount the great staircase.

In order to feel his hands entirely unencumbered for the task ahead, he had clapped his hat upon his head; and within these stately walls, in this theatre of flawless etiquette, this already branded him a kind of insurrectionist, a savage trespasser and one who batters down every gate.

The first door he needed to pass through opened onto the grand reception hall. But this commanding hall, regarded by him till now only as the most magnificent setting for revelry, had turned for him into that mysterious country which goes by the name of outlaw territory. When about to venture in, he grasped it with complete clarity. And in softly drawing the door shut behind him, he was sealing his farewell to all the proprieties he had learnt, to every scruple that had governed his life. By the

merest bodily fact of the deed itself, he already sensed he had breached society's most commanding laws, and was henceforward liberated from all accepted rules…

But these things mattered not at all when set against the primeval instinct now coursing through him, a timeless imperative drowning out everything else! Moving alongside these walls decorated with every variety of gold leaf, their ornamental panels and carved architraves, he had now found the way back to nature, pursuing that merciless path along which the dispensers of justice in ancient times had gone to sate themselves likewise.

The enormous succession of reception rooms was utterly abandoned. With the shutters drawn, only faint slivers of illumination filtered inside. That ominous visitor's passage did not disturb the great sweep of silence. Within that shadowy dimness, white holland cloths transformed the furniture into an array of ill-defined shrouds. The insipid odour of staleness ruled there as though in a necropolis where the brilliant pageantry of yesterday's soirée had been laid to rest—what remained of so much refinement, so many rivalries and caprices now past, of hushed whispers and extinguished cheers.

Having traversed the ceremonial rooms, Exireuil had gained entrance to a pretty little nook whose sole purpose was to house a narrow winding stair… Yes! It was exactly here that Saffre had, one evening following dinner, conducted Exireuil so as to deliver to him the paperwork for a so-called overseas commission. It was during this very absence, too, that the banker had for the second time taken advantage of Giselle, rendered even more vulnerable by her loneliness and completely overwhelmed by the violence and intimidation. She had acknowledged this occasion too, Giselle had, when she told him all… At the memory, a blood-red mist swept across the husband's mind…

The stairway now under his feet would take him, he knew, directly to Saffre's personal quarters. The fellow was at home and turning people away, which meant he had work on hand and was deep in it, Exireuil thought. Such a clandestine and improvised back way lay outside any servant's watch… One flight more would bring him to the very doorway of Saffre's office, where he could step right through.

Up the staircase Exireuil went smartly, pushed open the door—quite as if he owned the place—and found nobody there. Everything—the papers on the writing-table, the furniture about—kept that dutiful air of tidiness characteristic of chambers whose owner has not come back since the household did its work. In the stately chimney, no hint of a fire lately lit, never mind the bitter cold. His enemy might be laid up, Exireuil mused. Then again, if that were so, surely the porter would have been told a reason so entirely proper for denying admittance? The fact could easily be established, moreover, since Saffre's sleeping-quarters were just there, directly at hand, and all he had to do was enter it—still with that same easy familiarity.

Exireuil slipped briskly through to the adjacent quarters. A glance told him the baron was not between the sheets… Splendid! A series of screens, positioned by the look of them to keep out the cold, were aligned centrally and blocked off the full expanse of the cavernous room, luxurious and solemn beneath its panelling. Hearing the footfalls, an assistant doctor stepped out from beyond the screens and, seeing the stranger arrive via a private pas-

sage with his hat still on, supposed him to be a close family member with every right to be there.

He offered a polite salutation and asked:

“Is the gentleman planning to sit with the baron a little?”

Too agitated now to establish what business this youth had being there, and taking him in error for a freshly appointed assistant of sorts, Exireuil answered with the air of a man wanting to be left alone:

“Yes! As much time as need be… What makes you ask?”

“I have paperwork that wants doing, and I’d seize the chance of your being here to slip away and deal with it…”

“Good! Do so!” Exireuil told him, eager above all to get him out of the way, to be alone with Saffre, and to finish what he had come for.

The unwelcome presence had taken himself off… Divided still by the rank of screens that kept them invisible to each other, they were merely two now—singly, each—sharing the air of the room…

Stepping ahead, Exireuil thrust the barrier away, prepared without pause to rush through and choke off with

his bare hands the first outcry he would both summon forth and snuff out.

Yet what met his eyes made him the one who staggered backwards and cried out!

Saffre sat trussed along the length of a great chair-back. The sleeves of a madman's jacket had swallowed his hands and arms, leaving his torso defenceless, inert as a felled log. The proud head of former days now lolled ahead on loosened sinews; nothing but his wild shock of hair brought to mind the lion he used to be. Against his flushed face, his bloodshot eyes could be discerned solely by the yet deeper red shine of two blood-soaked spots.

As the whirlwind of passions threw Exireuil this way and that, rage surged up afresh as he grasped that his private vengeance was eluding him. Witnessing the vengeful blow that had been visited on Saffre felt as if this guilty man had escaped injury entirely, from the perspective of a headsman appearing too late to do his particular work and sate his hands in the doing.

"Oh!" came from Exireuil as he approached near… "You vile wretch!…"

The spasms twisting his features roared out what he dared only mutter beneath his breath.

“Have you any idea why I’ve come?... Feel my hatred, do you, and this craving to choke the life from you?...”

But Saffre, ground down after twelve hours of violent mania, furious ravings, and epileptic fits, sat obliterated and senseless, hatching the return of an attack in utter imbecility. His derangement filled and refilled him with deadness, with an indifference black as night...

“Can you even hear me?... Cur! Scoundrel!... Are you taking this in?... taking in that I know everything?...” demanded Exireuil, smashing his fists against each other in the distress of not being able to make good use of them.

Saffre showed not the slightest flicker of understanding... Exireuil tried to find his sightline and, hoping to goad him straight on, moved agitatedly here and there, barely stopping short of touching him... Yet those flaming eyes remained steady, not a quiver, not a flicker, even as the frenzied hand menaced to gouge them out...

“Nothing at all!...” declared Exireuil... “I won’t get a damn thing!... Not even a flicker, not the tiniest shred of

feeling to wrench from him!... Ah! Blackguard!... given that I'm ass enough, spineless enough, looking at you trussed up like a piece of charcuterie, to prevent myself from ripping your hide off, from shattering your bones and knocking out your teeth... For God's sake, move... yell... be scared... feel something... Try at least to feel, down in that wreck of a body, every bit of pain I wish on you for the pain you've given me!... You decrepit dotard! You accursed old beast!...

And at the peak of his wrath, in frenzied helplessness to gain any further redress, he spat upon that insensate face, his insult lost amid the slobber already streaming down.

Henceforth, there remained for Exireuil nothing but to withdraw from his attempted strike, to give up on consequences that were wholly impossible, and liberate himself from that exasperating, grotesque and worthless spectacle.

He made for the way out. The quickest way, the most obvious, was to take the door opening directly, by way of the corridor, onto the grand landing of the principal stairway. And yet, moved by an impulse that remained uncon-

sidered, devoid of thought, he set off again along the devious route he had followed to get there… With each passing second, his habitual self, overthrowing his spontaneous self, was recovering its place in him… As he made his way back through the salons across which, a little while ago, his would-be murderer's tread had passed, he glided now with an almost skulking step, whilst his habitual nature reasserted itself, with a renewed anxiety about what-one-ought-to-do and what-folk-would-think…

He was thereby approaching anew the gateway of instituted proprieties, instinctively recovering his post of civility and his responsibilities of outward show in the world's affectations… And upon regaining the mirrored salon—the entire tragic nature of his flight now reduced to merely a private little escapade—he perceived himself definitively re-established there in his role of unimpeachable propriety among his peers.

He had only just come back in when Baroness Saffre made her entrance. She expressed regret at having allowed her guest to grow impatient, doubtless for far too long. She deemed it well that he had requested her pres-

ence rather than that of her husband, now nowhere to be found; and upon this, she shared with him the actual truth of things.

Exireuil's grim and glacial air offered a posture sufficient that he was spared having to pretend amazement as he listened to the tale of this profound drama enacted in a human brain, the conclusion to which he himself, by his own witness, had just ineradicably seen.

As to the condition of Saffre's finances, the Baroness offered Exireuil her heartfelt thanks for the forewarning which, these few minutes past, she learned had come to her indirectly through him.

He objected:

"Grommelain shouldn't have brought me into this… I believed recently, given our longstanding family ties, that I ought to give him certain important counsel… But it was confidential, between the two of us, and he shouldn't have involved me publicly."

"Please forgive him… If he uttered your name in the talk I've this instant ended with him, it was merely that he described you as standing in the best position of any-

one to keep assisting me and my family, suffering as we are so dreadfully, in something of great consequence…"

"I, madame?" asked Exireuil, lifting his head with surprise. "What do you mean?"

Deep within the looks that crossed between the husband of the mistress and the wife of the lover, there burned an identical enigmatic spark—lit in her case by sharp inquisitiveness, and in his by a desperate urge to shed light upon one of his grimmest misgivings… Neither one nor the other troubled themselves any longer with the part or recollection of Baron Saffre, his personhood collapsed into rags, flesh and spirit alike, and the sorry remains that were still being held upright and propped in the room upstairs! Yet in the time not long past when that fellow up above had been a ruthless orchestrator of schemes, he had established an unutterable relationship between these two conversants who, remaining completely in the current of action and life, were now meeting face to face… The dark eyes of Exireuil strove to probe the profoundest depths of the baroness's understanding to see if she knew… And what of him—was he in the know? This is what she would have dearly loved to learn,

through the pale projection of her discreet, watchful eyes…

The Baroness took up again:

“Monsieur d’Exireuil, you gained knowledge of many of my husband’s affairs from the man himself… We cannot do without support as shrewd, as dependable, as knowledgeable as what you can provide… My condition is too uncertain for me to withstand single-handedly the trials I have every reason to expect will descend upon me straightaway… Between the legal proceedings looming ahead, the considerable share of the marital property I might still salvage, and the onerous responsibilities of stewardship that will later devolve upon me, I require the cordial aid of someone of your distinction for years to come—nay, in perpetuity—you whose talents I have heard lauded time and again… My son, who has a horror of accounts, is no use to me whatsoever, and neither are my daughters’ husbands: the first is removing himself to the country, the second is completely taken up with his wife… Surely I need not specify that you would name your own entitlement to our sincere indebtedness?”

There was but a single reaction in Exireuil: the urge to refuse… His mind held one purpose alone: the wish to have ended for good any financial entanglement with everything touching upon the name Saffre.

The Baroness would not relent:

“I am not asking this of you merely for myself. I also beg this of you at the instance of my son-in-law de Grommelain, who holds you in the most genuine regard… You must not refuse the importunities of one who is your friend…”

The truth was that the Baroness had been prompted by the Count’s entreaties, who was keen to prevent the abrupt destitution of a man he described as being, in his own phrase, known to him through family connexions. In this man Grommelain perceived someone of good birth, his equal; he held dear a married man who, again mirroring his own situation, had been handsomely duped. And in keeping with the bond of solidarity whereby Exireuil had alerted him to the Baron Saffre’s last intrigues, he welcomed the chance to acquit himself of his moral indebtedness, chivalrously, nobly, with his belle-mère footing the bill.

While the Baroness pressed him, Exireuil could not help thinking that save for some modest returns recently obtained, now become decidedly revolting to live upon, he possessed no means in view. It occurred to him likewise that this fortune not his own, in the intricacies of which they were urging him to involve himself again, could hardly contain any trace of what his loathsome foe, the towering Saffre, had heaped up, manipulated, and afterwards flung abroad in lumps, hither and thither. However, the most fundamental respect for his own person, the intensity of the most unutterable loathing, steered him clear of any temptation to relent. He declined politely, falling back upon engagements he was about to have to attend to. He mentioned forthcoming journeys he intended to make, the distinct chance of going abroad permanently.

"Give yourself a moment to consider," the Baroness said in closing... I shall not consider what you say now to be your last word... Pay me another visit when you've discussed matters with Madame d'Exireuil and settled upon whatever would be most agreeable to your circumstances..."

As Exireuil bid the baroness farewell, her parting word began at once to skitter lightly across the shallows of his consciousness.

Our circumstances? Why yes, of course! Ought he not to contemplate what they were likely to impose? And were these not considerations of the first order for one of his station, now completely returned to his counterfeit self?

Yet first and foremost, it was to his wife's side that he sensed he must hasten back without delay. Thinking of the state of torment in which he had forced Giselle to suffer, writhing in uncertainty and dread, he became mortified on her account. His heart softened with self-abasement, thinking back on the worthlessness of the endeavour that had served as his excuse to leave her vulnerable to every torment, and envisaging the mismatch between her still-profound emotions and his own now-modest ones… Such that upon having the weighty door of the house thrown open again, nothing was left to him—of all the seething volcano his spirit had been when he had formerly surged up against that very spot to force his

entry—save the dim-witted notion of getting hold of a cab.

Still, barely had he set foot in the street when he came nose to nose with Tarsul. The fellow was on a fact-finding mission, eager to probe the baroness's frame of mind, all while forgetting—in his jolly delight at the ruckus—the nuisance of now having to acquire elsewhere those gains people credited him with making there. Arthur Saffre had put him wise to everything, having turned directly to his family's established confidant amid the confusion of so extraordinary a day.

The pair approached each other with a caution that exposed how all they truly had to discuss was exactly what they were avoiding.

"And?" ventured Tarsul with the impish smirk he wore whenever settling his monocle back in place.

"And?" returned Exireuil.

They eyed one another with caution… But Exireuil's ravaged look betrayed him to such a degree that Tarsul, secure in his own sangfroid, chose to uncover himself a bit through speech, so as to bring some equipoise to the dynamics of their meeting.

He fired off:

“Even so, the most extraordinary affairs do come to light!…”

Exireuil offered matter-of-factly:

“One learns something new every day…”

Once more, quiet fell between them. Whereupon Tarsul took up again:

“Speaking for myself, I’ve made the dispassionate decision to let nothing amaze me.”

“That’s perhaps the soundest approach one could take!” noted Exireuil in a low voice and with a grave expression.

This made Tarsul suddenly aware of the personal calamity that had surely overturned his interlocutor’s means of subsistence amid the colossal fracas. And, affecting benevolent concern:

“I rather hope you’ve escaped any damage from affairs over there?” he said, motioning towards the Saffre residence with the carelessly blasé flick of a thumb angled back past his shoulder.

Under the genial surface of the question, Exireuil had glimpsed a whole lengthy assault insinuating itself, a

viper's head rearing up. He reared back defensively and fired in return:

"Me?... How might I be damaged? Make yourself clear!"

"I don't know the particulars... I'd supposed... word had reached me that you and Saffre... that is, that you'd had a stake in his enterprises..."

Within the inadvertent suggestion that had escaped Tarsul's lips, Jacques d'Exireuil caught what seemed an echo of all worldly opinion, like a stifled tone of the reproach soon to be raised in unison against him as a husband, concerning the Saffre scandal. It sent a shudder through him; and twirling his moustache with a belligerent air to accentuate the interpretation he was encouraging others to disseminate concerning his behaviour:

"Dear man," he announced by way of swift decision, "I only entangled myself with the baron's business to protect the baroness's stake in it. I agreed to such a thing... you hear me clearly?...merely at the repeated request made of me by her and by my long-time friend de Grommelain... They had me step in too belatedly to forestall the ruin. Yet the debris still needs rescuing, and my duty

goes on… The baroness, warranted or not in her faith in my ability, has but now begged me not to leave her stranded… Having at no time served any cause but hers, my warm allegiance shall serve her till the last!…”

For good and all, it was as if into a speaking-trumpet that he had launched this seemly, palatable response at Tarsul—one moreover handy to spread about the parlours, for those searching what to relate in turn or at a loss what to gainsay.

At which point Exireuil, moving with firm intent, strode away to take up again the thread of his life, which a convulsion of nature had done no more than upset. And he was convinced that only a concern for public opinion—of the most justifiable sort—accounted for his changed prospects for what lay just ahead.

Tarsul, not deceived in the least, was all the same astounded for a spell at learning that the Saffre faction and the Exireuil faction continued to cohere in some fashion yet and by virtue of something… Then, true to his pet philosophy, he delighted in noting the abiding, the wondrous, the unique robustness of the financial tie in

social commerce, fashionable associations, and personal affections.

And so, a disaster had devoured fortunes towering like pyramids! Amid the inferno of lunacy, a monumentally built mind had crumbled!... And what stood as the foremost object one saw re-emerging, crisp, unblemished, imperishable, from under this overwhelming wreckage? Tarsul caught himself responding, with the choicest grin his diabolical face could muster: it was the delicate framework supporting a final liaison of pleasure, contrived by Baron Saffre, one-time grand master of finance.

THE END

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